

11:11 by lovelysarcastic

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Summary:

“You were my wish.”

The girl blinked, confused, as she approached him.

“Your wish?”

He raised his arm to let her see his watch.

“11:11 is the wish hour. If you look at your watch and see that hour, you have to close your eyes and make a wish. I wished for you to show up again, and you did! You’re my eleven, eleven.”

(On Hiatus)

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

Hello!

Yes, I'm back. I think, not sure yet... I'm posting this chapter, but I am not sure of the story. It's another AU because, as you know, I love to explore different kinds of worlds with the Stranger Things characters. I hope you enjoy this story. It's a bit angsty, but... well, it's the type of story you're used to read from me.

I would like if you guys told me what you think because I am honestly a bit scared of how you're going to react to this story's plot.

Present Day – May 2017

Her family was only allowed to see her after the baby was brought back from all the medical exams to the room she was staying.

Jane Ives, who had slept almost all afternoon, smiled sleepy, yet gratified, at the nurse who held her baby boy in the arms.

“He’s very healthy, Mrs. Ives.”

Jane felt tears in her eyes. Letting go of her necklace – it was a small, circular silver pendant -, she pulled herself into a more sitting position on the hospital bed and stretched her arms to grab her baby for the second time. The first time had been right after he was born, still in the delivery room, but everything had been so foggy and painful. Her husband had not been there, having got stuck at a very important meeting and only getting the message afterwards.

Jane held her baby closely to her chest. She looked at him carefully, noticing how his skin was pale, how his little nose was wrinkled in a funny way as he slept, how tiny and weightless his head was, how dark the few strands of his hair-

His hair was black.

She looked up at the nurse, whose lips still drew that happy smile for the newly mother. Jane felt like crying.

She looked down at her baby again. He was beautiful. He was perfect.

“Your family is here to see you, Mrs. Ives. Can they come in?”

Jane Ives nodded.

The nurse left the room. A few minutes later, her mother and stepdad showed up.

Terry Ives had aged beautifully: no white hairs, almost no wrinkles, and a beautiful smile; a smile that Jane had inherited from her. She had had lived a tough life until she had met her current husband. She had not known who Jane’s real father had been, she had fought against drugs for a while, but she had come through and had been the perfect mother for her daughter.

Her stepdad, Martin Brenner, was a tall man, much older than his mother, with complete white hair and wrinkles all over his face. He was a multimillionaire business man, having one of the most successful travelling agencies of the country. He had met her mother upon a trip they had taken when Jane was six. Her mother fell completely head over heels for the man and they had got married when Jane was seven.

“Where’s my husband?” She asked.

As the question left her mouth, her husband showed up.

“Sorry. Bathroom.”

He walked up to the hospital bed and took one look at his son. He smiled happily, laying a careful hand on the baby’s head.

“He’s beautiful.”

Jane forced a smile.

Her husband was tall, with large shoulders, brown eyes and blonde

hair. His name was Gustav Evans. After graduating from business school, he started working with her stepfather. The two got along like father and son.

Gustav had not noticed how dark his new-born son's few strands of hair were, being completely enthralled with his overall existence. But Martin Brenner did.

"How come he has dark hair?" He asked, worried.

Jane looked at her mother, almost in a silent plead.

Terry Ives knew nothing, but, seeing her daughter's begging eyes, forced a chuckle and replied, "My mother had dark hair. Maybe it's from her."

Martin Brenner accepted the argument and smiled softly at his step-grandson.

"He's going to be a ladies' man, you can see it clearly."

Gustav agreed, proud.

Jane frowned.

"He'll be whatever he wants to be, Martin," she replied. She had never got used to call him any sort of fatherly expression.

Martin coughed.

"Well, sure, but--"

"I'm hungry," Jane said and turned to her husband of three years. "Can you find a nurse, please?"

"S-sure, sweetie."

Gustav left a kiss on her forehead before leaving the room.

"Can you grab me something to eat too, darling?" Terry Ives asked her husband with a gentle smile.

Martin nodded and left the room.

Terry made sure he had closed the door before stepping closer to her daughter. She looked at her grandson's head and then at Jane.

Jane had tears in her eyes.

"Please, Mom," she begged, "don't tell them anything."

Terry blinked.

"He's not-" Terry looked at the door, almost as if she had heard someone approaching it. But no one showed up, and so she turned to her daughter again - "He's not Gustav's, is he?"

Jane shook her head.

"N-no..."

July 2002

He was lost. He had never gone this deep into the woods, and now he was somewhere he had never been before and had no clue to how to get back to his friends.

Why, but why did he want to win this stupid game so bad?

It was just hide-and-seek. They always played it during summer vacation because the weather was nice and the woods were a fantastic place to play it, but their mothers only allowed them there when the sun was high up in the sky and there was no chance of them getting lost.

Of course, he had to get lost. He had heard one of his best friends getting closer to where his hiding spot was, so he decided to start running and kept on doing it until he realized he didn't know where he was. Just because he had wanted to win the stupid game so bad.

Now, he wandered around an unknown part of the woods, hoping there was something he could recognize and lead him back to his mates.

Strangely, he came across a wire fence. He stared at it, frowning. How came there was a fence in the woods? On the other side of it, it was just woods again.

Or was it?

He grabbed onto the small holes of the fence and looked closely to what was on the other side. Neither the trees nor the bushes seemed to have been left to its wild growth. They seemed cut and well-treated. The grass wasn't too big, unlike his side of the fence that went almost up to his ankles.

When looking closely, he saw a dirt track between the trees; a path clearly made by someone.

That part of the woods belonged to someone, he concluded. But who?

The boy sighed. It didn't matter to whom it belonged. He was lost and no one was around, whether was it on his side of the fence or the other.

He turned around and sat down on the grass. He wrapped his arms around his knees and prayed to some divine force to help him.

He looked at the time on his black watch.

11:11.

The wish hour, his mother had taught him. If you looked at the clock at 11:11, you should close your eyes and make a wish. It was a special hour.

He closed his eyes and asked for help.

Please, pretty please. Someone save me.

“Who are you?”

He jumped, surprised, and stood up clumsily.

On the other side of the fence, there was a girl.

“H-hi,” he muttered, agape.

The girl was about his age, he noticed. Her brown hair was short, above her shoulders, and curly. She had a snub nose (*it was cute*, he found himself thinking) and had big, brown eyes. Eyes that looked at him with surprise. She was wearing a pink dress that went below her knees and was barefoot. Her toes were dirty from the ground.

“Who are you?” She asked again.

“M-Mike. Mike Wheeler,” he answered. “And you?”

She looked him up and down, almost trying to understand if it was safe to tell him her name.

Eventually, she concluded that he was harmless.

“Jane. Jane Ives.”

Mike grabbed the wire fences, his fingers taking up the space in holes.

“Can you help me?” He asked.

“With what?” The girl asked back, taking steps closer to where he was.

“I’m lost,” Mike said. “I was playing hide-and-seek with my friends-“

“Hide-and-seek?” The girl interrupted.

“You don’t know what it is?”

She nodded.

“I do, I just... I haven’t played it in years.”

Mike felt sad for her.

“W-we can play someday if you want to,” he suggested.

The girl’s eyes perked up and she grabbed onto the wire fence as well, her hands a bit below his.

“Really?”

“Y-yeah,” Mike answered. “B-but I have to find my friends first. My mom will kill me if I’m not back home for lunch.”

The girl nodded, understanding.

“You can just follow the fence,” she said. “When you find the first corner, you just keep going ahead. It will lead to the road.”

“Are you sure?”

The girl smiled. But it was a sad smile.

“I know every inch of this property. I spend a lot of time in here.”

“Do you never leave it?” He asked.

The girl shrugged.

“Sometimes... But not to that side of the woods.”

“This side of the wood is scary,” Mike confessed. He looked at the fence and where it would lead. He could not see the corner that the girl talked about. “Is it far away? The first corner.”

“A few minutes away. But-“ She lowered her head, shy –“I can keep you company?”

The boy smiled.

“Yes!”

The girl smiled back. Mike found himself mesmerized by it.

Present Day

“So, when does my wife get to leave the hospital?” Gustav Evans asked one of the nurses as she entered the room to get the empty food tray from the wooden table resting at the end of Jane’s bed.

“Gus, please,” Jane sighed. She looked over at her baby, who was sleeping peacefully in his hospital crib, dressed in a green with little tigers jammies. She smiled softly.

“What? I want to take you home, sweetie.”

Jane shook her head.

“It’s better if everything’s okay before I go home, isn’t it?”

The nurse smiled at her, thankful. Jane smiled back, tired.

Gustav sighed.

“Fine,” he muttered and leaned back on the armchair, so he could fetch his cell phone from his trousers’ pocket. “I didn’t want to leave you here tonight. I have a big meeting tomorrow morning and-”

“It’s just for a night, Gus. You should go home and rest. Me and Dylan will be just fine.”

Gustav looked over at his sleeping son.

It had been Jane’s idea to name him Dylan. She had refused to hear Gustav’s ideas for names after they found out they were having a boy, demanding to have their son named Dylan. Why? Gustav didn’t know and didn’t ask. His wife was the one that had been pregnant, and Dylan was an okay name, so he had accepted it.

“Okay, okay.” He stood up and grabbed his suit’s coat from the armchair’s back. “I’ll be here as soon as I can tomorrow, okay?”

Jane nodded. He leaned down to kiss her forehead. Then, he went around her bed and to their son’s crib. He placed a gentle hand on his head and smiled softly.

“We’ll see each other tomorrow.”

Jane forced a smile.

“We will.”

Her husband left. Jane felt her tense shoulders relaxed. She took a deep breath and covered her eyes with her hands, trying to control the tears again.

It wasn't that she didn't love Gustav.

They had met in Jane's first year of college, at a party (how cliché was that?). She had just turned nineteen at the time, and he had been twenty-one. She remembered perfectly how it had happened: she had been sitting on a chair in the kitchen, watching a bunch of guys playing beer pong. Her friends had left her alone hours ago, preferring to dance in the living-room or to fool around with random boys in one of the bedrooms.

Gustav had entered the kitchen, looking tall and handsome as he always did, holding a beer in his hand. He had been alone, trying to find his friends. As he searched in the kitchen for them, he found her, sitting alone, also with a drink in her hand. She had not noticed him, being entertained by the beer pong game that was going on. Gustav had approached her and started making small chat. He kept his distance, he respected her and, at the end of the night, she had allowed him to get her number.

They went on three dates in the following month and only at the end of the fourth date did Gustav asked her to be his girlfriend. She had said yes. He was nice, sweet and the kind of guy who didn't disappoint you. They were happy together.

She took him home to introduce him to her mother and stepdad on their six-month anniversary and both fell instantly for him, saying he was the perfect guy for Jane. *You've done it*, she remembered her mother saying, *you've found your other-half*.

But no, she had not. Well, she had, but Gustav wasn't him.

The baby started whimpering. Jane turned to him, saw the ugly face he was making and sighed. She pulled the covers from her body and slowly got out of bed.

The baby started crying. Jane picked him up and held him close to her body, to her chest.

“Shh, shhh, it’s okay, baby,” she murmured against his forehead. Her nose touched the few black strands of his hair. She closed her eyes and kept away the tears. “It’s okay, Dylan...”

The baby stopped crying after a while, feeling comfortable against his mother’s chest. Jane didn’t have the guts to put him down on his crib again, so she tried to get back into her bed with him.

A nurse came to check on her around two am.

“You have to sleep, Mrs. Ives,” the woman said kindly, holding out her arms to take the baby. “And the baby needs to get used to sleep on the crib.”

Jane sighed.

“I know... It’s just-“ She shook her head – “Never mind.”

She allowed the nurse to take the baby and lay him on his crib.

“Now, get some sleep. He’ll probably wake up in an hour hungry.”

Tired, Jane nodded.

July 2002

“So, you met a girl? In the woods?” Lucas seemed suspicious with the all thing. But that was just Lucas being Lucas.

“Yes. She lives there. Well, not in the woods, but in a big property. It takes up a lot of the space of the woods. Her stepdad is very rich,” Mike told his friends what the girl had told him the day before.

His friends had been searching for him the previous day, worried sick that they had lost Mike. But Mike had managed to find his way to where they usually play after getting to the road. The girl had not been wrong about her directions. However, he had not had the time to explain to his friends what had happened in the time he was lost in the woods, since they were late for lunch. So, he waited until the next day. They had planned to go to the public swimming pool.

“What’s her name?” Will asked, curious, after taking off his t-shirt. He was the shortest and skinniest of the four of them.

“Jane,” Mike answered, getting rid of his sneakers.

They had picked an empty spot a bit far away from the swimming pool, but they’d rather have to walk a bit more to get to it than be surrounded by crowds of people. Everyone wanted to be near the swimming pool.

“And she’s ten?” Dustin asked.

“Yeah, she told me so,” Mike said.

“And she doesn’t go to school with us?” Lucas asked, frowning.

“She says she goes somewhere else. A private school or something,” Mike replied.

“Fancy shit,” Dustin joked.

“It’s her stepfather that wants her to go there.”

“You know a lot about this girl?”

Mike blushed, bringing out the freckles on his cheekbones.

“We talked a bit as she helped me get back to you guys.”

The three boys stared at their best friend. Mike looked back.

“What?”

“Are you going to see her again?”

Mike heisted, but nodded.

Yeah, he wanted to see her again. She seemed lonely.

The next day, since he had no plans with his friends until dinner time (they were all going to Lucas’ house for a sleepover), Mike took his bike and tried to find his way back to the wire fence. He hoped to see the girl again.

After riding around for a while, and having dragged his bike too because it became impossible to ride it among the trees' roots and bushes, Mike managed to finally find the wire fence.

He laid his bike against a tree and walked up to it. He had brought a backpack with things to show Jane.

"Jane?" He called out.

No one showed up. He called out again, and again, and again.

The girl didn't show up.

She wasn't around.

"Fuck," the ten-year-old muttered unenthusiastically. Why didn't he think this through? The girl had said that the property in which she lived was extent. What were the odds of finding her this spot again?

Mike sat down on the dirt ground, his back turned to the wire fence. He decided to wait. Maybe just for thirty minutes, he would see if she would show up.

Mike looked at his black watch.

11:11.

He blinked surprised. A soft smile crept on his lips and he closed his eyes, ready to make a wish.

Please, let Jane come again.

"Mike."

Mike stood up clumsily and turned around. The girl was wearing a green dress today and her hair was tied in a messy, short ponytail. He smiled.

"You were my wish."

The girl blinked, confused, as she approached him.

"Your wish?"

He raised his arm to let her see his watch.

“11:11 is the wish hour. If you look at your watch and see that hour, you have to close your eyes and make a wish. I wished for you to show up again, and you did! You’re my eleven, eleven.”

The girl smiled shyly. She stopped right on the other side of the fence and placed her hands on it. Mike grabbed onto the fence as well, his hands filling the holes right next to hers.

“I can’t believe you’re here again,” she confessed.

“I wanted to see you,” he admitted with a shy smile. “I wanted to show you some games and books.”

The girl’s eyes perked up.

“Really?”

He nodded and took off his backup. He opened it up and took out a comic book.

“This one is really cool. It’s about a guy who gets bitten by a spider and gets superpowers and-“

“Spiderman,” the girl interrupted. “I’ve heard of him.”

“It’s cool, isn’t it?”

She shrugged.

“I don’t know much of the story, actually.”

“Oh, I can tell you,” Mike suggested. “I mean, if you want.”

Jane nodded frenetically.

“Yes, please.”

September 2015

Jane Ives had always loved the theatre. Her stepdad and mother used to take her to theatre plays all the time when she was younger. She felt good in there, watching a story taking place right in front of her eyes, hear the actor's voice just a few meters away from her; sometimes there were songs too, and she was completely hooked by those. Everything about the plays and the theatre fascinated Jane to the point that she graduated from college with a degree on Theatre History.

Then, with a bit financial help from her stepdad, she restored from the ground an abandoned theatre building. It took six months to get it done, but, in the end, it was worth it. The place was her second home, a beautiful, huge building in the middle of Chicago. It was called Theatre of the Elevens.

She kept it opened by presenting musicals, theatre plays, painting exhibitions and artefacts displays. Her best friend, Max Winter, had a degree on Accounting, minor in History, and she helped her out full-time with the theatre.

Of course, many people who wished they could have the same didn't have because, let's be honest here, they didn't have Jane's stepdad. Martin Brenner was one of the most influencing and richest men in the country. Terry Ives had hit the jackpot when she married him sixteen years ago (Jane sometimes would disagree on this, but never out loud. Her mother's life and her husband's career depended on Martin's kindness).

"So, we have a director and a playwright coming here today," Jane informed her partner as she arrived at her small office in the second floor of the theatre building. Max's office was right next to hers. Then, there was a door keeping the two rooms away from the visitors and clients' eyes. It was their private haven in the theatre.

"So fast? That's good. The musical guys have just wrapped everything up and took the last pieces of decoration they had brought in."

The theatre's staff (that is, Jane and Max) provided their clients' (or, like Jane called them, guests) with everything they needed, but, in most cases, the clients would already bring with them most of the stuff to get the show going. Most of the theatre crews that showed up

would probably be on tour throughout the country, presenting their original plays to the city's crowds, and so the costumes and the play's decoration were basically all done, except for a few things they always had to redo whenever they got somewhere new.

"Yeah, they'll be arriving –" Jane checked her cell phone's clock – "at any minute now, I guess. I didn't give them a specific hour to show up."

"Smart," Max commented and both women snorted an amused laugh. For some unknown and bizarre reason, theatre's crew members were always late for meetings.

"Well, anyways, I gotta go." Max stood up from the chair in front of Jane's desk and waved around a stack of papers. "Bills to pay, things to sign, people to call."

"I can call some people if you want," Jane volunteered.

"Nah, you take care of the director and playwrighter. I'll get this done before noon."

Max and Jane smiled at each other, and then the redhead left the office, closing softly the door behind her.

The two women met when Jane first moved to Chicago. She was fifteen at the time and really scared to have to face a new bunch of noisy, snobbish, rich kids whose daddies and mommies gave them everything they asked for at the snap of a finger. It was ridiculous, really, but Jane knew she was part of the package of rich kids as well. At least, to others, she was. Jane had always tried not to ask much from Martin Brenner. She felt that every time she indeed asked, it was like adding up to a debt she could never repay.

On the first day at the new private school, after putting up with two terrible personal presentations in front of class, Jane found herself crying in the bathroom. She cried for the people she had left behind in her old hometown: all the maids of the house, their motorist, the gardener, the boy she had become friends with four years ago... The boy she had learned to love. None of them could have come with the family to Chicago; they all had their lives connected to Hawkins.

Jane felt lonely and sad. She had been holding on to a necklace - it had a small, circular silver pendant on it – when Max showed up in the bathroom and heard her cries.

“Do you need any help?” The girl had asked in front of the closed door to where Jane had been hiding.

“N-no,” Jane had replied weakly.

Then, a loud sobbed had echoed in the bathroom.

“Well, it actually seems like you do. I’m Max. Are you new here?”

“Y-yes.”

“I can help you,” Max had suggested softly. “I know most people here are dumbasses. I promise I won’t be one.”

And she had been right. They became friends, then best friends and now were business partners. It didn’t matter that all the money to restore the theatre building had come from Martin Brenner’s pocket (Jane had tried to reject it, but her mother had begged her to take it); he had given it all as a gift to the girls. The building was theirs; Jane Ives and Max Winter were the two names that you’d find in the contract, telling you that they owned the building.

Suddenly, there was a shy knock on the door.

“Come in,” Jane said.

A tall, fat bald man opened slightly the door, peeked inside and smiled bashfully at her.

“Jane Ives?” He asked

She nodded.

He walked in. The man was wearing a green suit and had a funny tie on. The tie had images of balloons stamped on it. Jane almost cracked a smile, but then remembered to remain professional.

“Good morning, Mrs. Ives. I’m Taylor Castillo. I’m here to talk to

you-“

“Eleven?”

Jane's ears perked up at the sound of that nickname. She stood up abruptly and looked behind the bald man.

The man who had entered the room after Taylor Castillo was tall, but he was rather lanky. She could see he had large shoulders under his dark-blue shirt and his fingers, which were holding on to some papers, were long and slender. However, it was his face that made her stare. The dark black hair, the pale skin, the freckles... Those eyes, those brown eyes who had once showed her the world when she had been stuck inside a huge, wide property with no permission to go outside.

“Mike Wheeler?” She tried.

But she did not have to ask for a confirmation. The only person in the world that had ever called her Eleven was Mike Wheeler, the boy that showed her friendship and then love.

Her first love.

Mike Wheeler smiled as he nodded. He walked up to her and stretched a hand to greet her. Jane did the same. But, as their hands almost touched, Mike stared down at hers. He blinked, surprised.

“You're engaged,” he stated.

The ring that Gustav had given her almost nine months ago sparkled in her finger. She hid her hand away – something that made her frown inside since she was never shy about showing it to other people. It was a beautiful golden ring, with a diamond on it.

“Yes.”

“Congratulations,” Mike said with a forced smile.

Why was he forcing a smile? And why was she forcing a smile back?

She had not seen him in almost ten years...

But her heart beat fast, just like in that afternoon...

August 2002

When Mike showed up at their spot in the wire fence, he was rather surprised to see Eleven standing outside the fence instead of inside. He let his bike fall against a tree and ran to her, his mouth opened in amazement.

“You’re outside!”

Eleven – he had one day decided to call her like that since she was his 11:11 wish – smiled shyly and played with the fabric of her yellow dress. She always wore dresses.

“I made a deal with the gardener,” she admitted timidly.

Mike’s face broke into a huge grin.

He had never seen Eleven outside the fence before. She had explained to him that she spent all the year away, in a private school, so during summer her stepfather wanted her to stay home with her mother, keeping her company and so. Terry Ives didn’t have the guts to explain to her husband that it was okay if her daughter wanted to leave the house to enjoy the summer.

“Where can we go?” Mike asked.

Eleven shrugged.

“Wherever you want to go. I haven’t seen much of Hawkins.”

Mike’s mouth dropped in shock. Eleven looked at him worried.

“Is it bad?”

Mike shook his head.

“N-No. Just... wait,” he muttered and took off his backpack from his shoulders. He opened the front pocket and grab his small wallet in

the shape of a frog. He counted the money had kept from his weekly allowances. Eleven peeked at what he was doing, curious. Mike looked up with a big smile. "We can go to Benny's for burgers!"

Eleven blinked.

"Benny's? Burgers?"

"Don't you like burgers?" Mike asked, worried.

"I... I think I do." Honestly, she didn't remember the last time she had had burgers.

They smiled at each other.

"Great. You can ride on the bike with me."

Mike turned to go get his bike, but Eleven came close and grabbed his wrist. He looked at her, astonished. They had never touched each other, having had the fence between them, keeping them apart. Maybe once or twice their fingers moved slightly against each other, but it would always be on accident. Anyways, Mike would be lying if he said he had never thought about holding Eleven's hand.

Eleven's skin was warm, but Mike's was warmer. Without the other knowing, their hearts beat fast, and they felt abruptly nervous. They were going to hang out with each other with no fence standing between them.

Eleven finally let go of his wrist, looking away embarrassed.

"I have to be home in two hours," she said. "My stepdad comes back from work around five and--"

"It's okay. We'll be here. I promise."

Eleven looked at Mike.

"Promise?" She repeated.

Mike nodded.

“Promise.”

Watching Eleven eat a burger was quite amusing. After taking the first bite, she stared at Mike with her mouth opened, and he could see bits of burger and bread in it. Then, she heard in her mind her stepdad saying to behave herself and closed her mouth, hiding it behind her hand. Yet, Mike could see her lips curled into a shy smile. He laughed softly.

“Good?”

Elven swallowed the piece of burger in her mouth before answering, “So good.”

She ate her burger and drank her coke faster than Mike did, which surprised him a lot. He wondered if she wanted a second one and turned to his backpack’s front pocket. He checked his money and came out with a sad expression.

“I... I don’t have money for another burger,” he confessed shyly. “Otherwise, I would-“

“Next time, I pay,” Eleven interrupted. “I’ll bring money.”

Mike blinked.

“Oh. Okay.” He smiled at her. “We can go to the arcade as well.”

Eleven nodded enthusiastically, drinking the last sips of her coke. She put the empty cup down and leaned over the table to Mike. He stared at her, confused, until he felt her warms around his neck, pulling him to a hug.

“Thank you so much.”

Mike’s throat was dry, and no words passed through it. His heart beat crazily fast.

He gulped.

“Y-you’re welcome.”

Mike hadn't known then, but that was the day he started to fall for Eleven.

2. Chapter 2

October 2015

Jane Ives had not expected to meet Mike Wheeler again in her life. She had thought that life had only given them one chance at being with each other and they had let it escape through their fingers at the early age of fifteen. But here he was, presenting his play in her theatre building for the next month. His crew, who had yet arrived in Chicago except the director who had already left her office, was small, with ten actors, two painting artists and two sound-check guys. Thankfully, they would all manage to fit in the rooms in the fourth floor. Jane and Max had requested guest rooms to be built in that floor for that exact purpose: make life easier for theatre crews to stay in town.

“Here are the keys,” Jane said, handing a bunch of keys to Mike. She felt nervous. “Those are all from the rooms upstairs and this one –” She took one squarish key from the small key box she kept in her office, under her desk, but which was now on top of it – “This one is for the back door. You guys can walk in and out from there. You have access to many places here, not the office, though, of course. As you can imagine why- Well, it’s not that we don’t trust our guests, but we-“

“You talk so much,” Mike interrupted her, fascinated.

Jane went quiet, staring at him surprised.

“I... Sorry. I didn’t remember you talking this much. Rambling was my thing.”

Jane found herself blushing. Her heart was beating at an unusual pace.

“Sorry. Sometimes I get nervous around clients.”

Mike’s lips formed a sad smile.

“You don’t have to treat me like a client,” he admitted. “I’m... Well,

we're old friends."

They were more than old friends. Mike had been first kiss. Her second, third, fourth, fifth... She had lost count, really. But he had been so important to her. And here he was again.

"When's your wedding?" He asked next.

"Oh, in... in three weeks."

The wedding had taken months to plan. Eleven could not remember how many headaches she had had because of it, or the fights she had had with Gustav because he always said *you can choose whatever you want, sweetie, I'm okay with it*. But she wasn't okay with him letting her decide everything. She knew he said that to make her happy, to let her plan the perfect day for them, but she had wished he had given their own wedding a bit more attention.

"You must be so happy," Mike observed.

Jane tried to smile, but all that came out was a kind of grimace expression.

Why couldn't she be happy about her own wedding?

Was it Mike? But he was just her first love; they hadn't seen each other in years and-

"Do you want to grab a burger later?" Mike suddenly asked.

Jane looked up at him (Good Lord, he was so tall) and blinked, surprised.

"I mean, -"Mike rubbed the back of his neck ashamed -"if you have the time and won't mind to spend a few hours with- I mean, it doesn't have to be a few hours, it's just a burger and- Well, you see-"

Suddenly, Jane started giggling. Giggling like the thirteen-year-old girl she had been, in love with a clumsy boy who rambled too much when he was trying to talk about his feelings, or when he had been caught admitting something he hadn't been quite ready to admit, but either way it was out, and he always tried to make it seem like it

wasn't a big deal when it was. Eleven – as she knew herself back then – would always giggle at him and then make him stop with a kiss on the lips.

She could still remember their first kiss and how nervous Mike had been.

“I would like to go have a burger with you, Mike,” Jane found herself saying. “I just have to warn my fiancé that I won't be going home for dinner.” And she leaned down to grab her purse and take her cell phone out of it.

“He won't mind?” Mike asked, worried.

“Of course not. You're an old friend, right? I can have a burger with an old friend.”

Mike smiled in relief.

If only her stupid heart accepted the just-an-old-friend lie.

Jane texted her fiancé a quick message: *Going out for a burger with an old friend. See you later. Love you.*

Gus didn't reply until later, almost at five pm when he got a break from work. His reply was a simple *okay, love ya*, and for some reason Jane felt sneaky, as if she were about to commit a crime and her soon-to-be husband had allowed it to happen because he was naïve and trusted her.

Well, why wouldn't he trust her? They had been together for four years now. There was never drama in their relationship. Everything had always been like a fairy-tale. Too good to be real sometimes. They respected each other's spaces, they had their own thing going and, despite sometimes things getting too *routine* - and Jane dared to think *boring* -, they managed to love each other just fine.

So, of course, Gus would trust her when she said she would go out for a burger with an old friend. What was weird about that? Nothing, really. If her stupid heart didn't swell every time Mike smiled at her. If she had not erupted into a giggling thirteen-year-old when Mike started rambling embarrassed. If she had not made plans to look for

something better to wear for dinner.

It wasn't even a proper dinner. It was just a burger.

But it was a burger with Mike Wheeler.

And, oh boy, she had loved Mike Wheeler so much.

February 2003

"How come you never take us with you to see your secret friend in the woods?" Lucas asked.

Mike blinked as he took his head out of one of his kitchen's cupboard's shelves. He looked at Lucas with a frown, while holding a package of cookies in his left hand.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, last summer, you went completely MIA on us some days to go see her. And then school started, and everything was cool- I mean, except for those weekends where you totally disappear on us, but oookaaay, we forgive you since we're cool friends. But now, now you're telling me you can't come hang out with us at the arcade *on Valentine's Day* 'cause you're going to see *Eleven*? What, is she your girlfriend or something?"

Mike's pale face turned complete red at the idea of Eleven being his girlfriend.

"N-no. We're just good friends. And she is home early for the weekend this weekend, so..." Lucas didn't look convinced. "I haven't seen her since Christmas."

Lucas snappishly raised his hands, almost as if Mike's argument had completely won him over.

"Oh, if you haven't seen her since Christmas, I guess-" Suddenly, he lowered his hand and sent his friend an are-you-kidding-me look -"Dude, at least, let us come too."

“But... you guys want to go to the arcade.”

“We want *you* to come with *us* to the arcade,” Luca replied.

Mike sighed. There went his Valentine’s Day plans with Eleven down the drain. He had thought about giving her something; he spent months saving some of his pocket money so that he could buy her a gift. But if his three best friends were going, well, he just didn’t have the guts to give the gift to Eleven now, did he? They would tease him endlessly about it.

Mike was too young to die from overheated embarrassment.

Together, the four boys took their bikes and rode deep into the woods, passing by their usual spot to play, near Will’s wooden castle, and going further. At a certain point, they had to get off their bikes and pulled them with them since the ground was filled with trees’ roots and wild bushes.

Finally, they got to a wire fence. Dustin stared at it, amazed, like it was the most gigantic wire fence he had ever seen; Will looked frightened and Lucas was making a facial expression that basically said *what kind of horror film did I just get myself into?*

Mike looked at his watch.

“She’ll be here soon.”

He had been surprised to get a call for Eleven a few days ago. Mike had not known how she found out his phone number, until his older sister, who had picked up the phone before him and had passed it to him after Eleven shyly requested to talk to him, told him that all the girl had to do was look them up in some yellow pages. Eleven had told him she would be coming back to Hawkins two days before the weekend. They made plans for Valentine’s Day, Mike pretending he did not know that Friday was February 14th, and promised to meet each other at 14:14. They always met each other on that kind of hours. Because she had been his 11:11 wish, and they assumed that meeting at that kind of hour would bring them luck.

Finally, he saw Eleven walking down the dirt track between the well-

treated trees and well-tamed bushes. She smiled at him, but the smile was soon lost as she saw the other three boys. She frowned her forehead, worried.

“It’s okay,” Mike said. “They’re cool.”

Lucas sent him an offended stare.

Eleven got closer to the fence. She placed her hands carefully on it and stared at the three boys. She had known them by name and characteristics: Lucas was the reason in the group, Dustin was the humour and Will the heart. When she had asked Mike what he was, he had shrugged and said he didn’t quite get it yet. Now, looking at the four of them together, she immediately understood that Mike was the kindness that kept the four together. It had been his kindness that allowed Eleven and he to become friends; that lead them to a point in their friendship where being friends wasn’t quite enough, but they were still too young to understand that.

“Can’t you come outside?” He asked gently.

Eleven shook her head.

“Stepdad is home. I told them I’d be gone for a walk in the property. They are expecting me soon....” She sounded sad when giving him the news. She had wanted to spend the afternoon with him, even brought a gift to give him, knowing that it was Valentine’s Day. She knew what it meant to give him a gift on this day, but she didn’t mind. She wanted Mike to know he was special to her. However, she didn’t want him to know that in front of his friends.

“Oh...”

“Why can’t you come out?” Dustin asked abruptly.

Mike sighed frustrated.

“Dude, I told you that already.” He turned his head fast to Eleven. “I’m sorry I told them about you- I mean, they asked, - I mean, it was- I-“ Mike got interrupted by the girl’s giggle and Lucas’ irritated *come on, dude*.

"It's okay," she said before turning Dustin, "I can't come out because my stepdad is home and he never lets me leave the house when he is... It's family time or whatever."

Dustin accepted the reason. Will looked at her with a small frown. It was sad to hear that.

"But Mike's your friend. You should be allowed to come see him," Lucas replied dryly. He didn't quite understand, or trust, the all dynamic between his best friend and the girl behind the wire fence, but it didn't mean he was heartless: the girl not being able to leave her house because of her stepdad? That was ridiculous.

"Yeah.... Well, my-" She went quiet.

Mike understood and said, "He doesn't know she has friends here in Hawkins."

"That's so sad," Will let out innocently. Abruptly, his hands flew to his mouth. "Sorry," he muttered.

Eleven shook her head.

"It's okay." She understood how her situation was odd to others. It was even odd to herself and she was living it.

"Anyways," Mike coughed uncomfortably, "El, this is Dustin -" He pointed at the curly brown-haired boy who was missing two teeth, -"this is Lucas," he motioned with his hand to the dark-skinned boy who was wearing a red coat -"and this is Will," he finalized, showing the shortest and skinniest boy in the group. "Guys, this is El. She's my friend since last summer. Please, be nice."

There was a moment of silence as Eleven waited for the three boys to react in some sort of way. It didn't matter if they rejected her, or said they didn't like her, as long as she got a reaction. At least, with that, she would know where she stood with Mike's friends.

Of course, deep down, she hoped they would, at least, approve of her presence.

Breaking the quietness, Lucas cleared his throat. Then, Dustin

chuckled and Will said with a tiny smile, “We’re always nice people, Mike.”

October 2015

Jane didn’t remember to laugh as hard as she was laughing now. She also tried to pull herself together and not spit pieces of chewed burger onto the table, but Mike wasn’t making her life easy, as he told her stories about his life. It turned out, being a theatre playwright on tour with a bunch of idiots that he had met during college and in his childhood, was fun.

“So, you know, Lucas was just being Lucas.”

Jane smiled, covering her mouth with a hand as she had a bunch of chewed burger in it.

She remembered Lucas, Dustin and Will very well. They had been fun to hang out with. Of course, she remembered that she always preferred the days she got to be with just Mike. The two of them would always have the most fun together and time always flew by too fast.

“And Will’s in the crew too?” Jane asked, fascinated.

“Yeah. Only Dustin is somewhere doing engineering stuff. The three of us got stuck together through college and now with the theatre crew. So, I write the stories, Will paints the settings and Lucas makes sure the sound does not betray us during the plays.”

Jane smiled softly at the man in front of her. He looked great, having lost a long time ago his childish looks; the ones that had mesmerized her since the first moment they had met, when he had got lost in the woods and found the wire fence that divided her stepdad’s property for the wilderness. He was a man now, yet Jane felt like she was a kid again, playing with her secret friend in the woods while her stepfather was at work.

He made her feel things she didn’t remember feeling.

And, at home, she had a fiancé waiting for her.

Jane looked down at her left hand and at the ring on her fourth finger. She touched it softly.

“It’s a nice ring,” Mike observed.

Jane looked at him and smiled shyly. She hid her hand under the table.

“Yes, it is...”

Then, why did she hide it from Mike’s eyes?

“How long have you guys been together?” He asked, curious.

But was he really? Jane tried to read his eyes; she used to be good at that; at understanding what Mike was feeling without him having to expose himself. But eight years had gone by... They weren’t the same people. They were adults now. She was engaged. Mike was-

“Are you seeing anyone?” She asked back, completely forgetting his question.

Mike blinked. Then, he chuckled uncomfortable.

“Actually, no. I’m always on tour, so... It’s hard to get into a relationship when you spend half of the year travelling around the country and other half writing shit somewhere. I don’t really stay in the same place for a long time.”

Jane frowned, confused.

“That’s how you live?”

“Yeah. I mean, my folks are back in Hawkins, my older sister is in Europe, dating this posh guy called Steve, and my younger sister is-“ Mike looked down in deep thought –“I think she’s in college now... No. She’s- Man, I don’t remember.”

Jane giggled softly.

Why was she giggling so much? She wasn't a giggler. She suddenly remembered Gus joking about how it hurt his feeling that she didn't giggle often at him and his puns because her giggles were cute and he'd like to hear them more often. But Jane was never one to giggle; if she found something funny, she would laugh, period.

"Anyways, you didn't answer my question," Mike reminded her with a cheeky smile. "How long have you two been together?"

"Four years now."

Mike blinked and dropped his chin in amazement.

"W-wow. No wonder you guys are getting married."

Jane really wished he didn't keep reminding her of that.

Why not? You ARE getting married in weeks.

"Y-yeah. You can come to wedding if you want to."

Shit, what?

Jane didn't quite understand what she had just done. Mike stared at her, surprised with the invitation, as she lowered her eyes to the table, where the trash from the burgers and drinks they had eaten was left for a waiter to come pick it up. Why did she say that? Why did she invite him to her wedding?

"I... Can I really come?"

Jane's eyes went wide-opened for a second, before she pulled herself together.

"Y-yeah. I just invited you, didn't I?"

Mike half-smiled at her, feeling quite nervous. To keep himself entertained with something, Mike grabbed his empty cup of coke and started playing with the straw, pulling it up and down. There was an annoying noise coming from the straw stroking repeatedly the plastic cover.

“Won’t it be weird?” Mike asked. Jane just stared at him. He chuckled apprehensively. “I mean, I was your-“ He suddenly frowned. – “I don’t even know what I was to you.”

Everything was the word Jane wanted to use. But she could not give that away to him, now, could she? So, she forced a kind smile instead and said, “My first love, I guess.”

Mike was surprised for a moment, had not expected her to admit it just like that. Then, he chuckled again.

“Good.”

“Good?” Jane replied.

“Yeah, you’re my first love too, ... El.”

El.

Jane sighed.

“No one has called me that in years.”

“I was the only one that called you that.”

Jane smiled gently. Mike stopped playing with the straw and pushed the cup away.

“Remember why?” She said.

Mike nodded with an intense gaze.

“Of course. You were my wish, El.”

June 2003

They hadn’t seen each other in months. Eleven hadn’t come back to Hawkins until school was over. On Easter holidays, her parents took her away on a trip to South America instead of staying at home. But, now, Martin Brenner was in the middle of a big deal and travelled all by himself to Europe, leaving his wife and stepdaughter back in

Hawkins.

“He’ll only come back in three weeks, so-“ An eleven-year-old Eleven smiled at Mike –“I have much free time since my mother is always out with friends.”

Mike smiled back, pulling his bike as strongly as he could down a small hill. They were going to the arcade to play games with the other three boys.

“That’s so cool.”

Eleven moved a strand of her curly brown hair from her eyes. Mike glanced at her. She had grown taller, just like he had in the past few months. Her skin was also darker from the vacation she had taken in South American during Easter. Her lips were redder, for some reason. Mike wondered if she had put on lipstick.

But why would she do that?

Suddenly, Mike stopped.

Eleven stopped as well and turned to him.

“Is everything okay?”

They were almost at the road, having taken a path through the woods that would lead them directly to a crowded place of the town.

Mike licked his lips nervously.

“I- I had gift to you,” he confessed. Eleven blinked. “But the guys went with me, so I didn’t... I didn’t have the courage to give it to you.”

Eleven stared at him with no reaction. Then, her lips curled into a happy smile.

“I had a gift to you too,” she confessed. Mike’s eyes sparkled. She giggled. “But I left it at home...”

“You can give me later,” Mike suggested. “But... can I give you mine

now?”

Eleven nodded enthusiastically. She couldn't believe that Mike had also got her a Valentine's Day gift.

Keeping his bike up by leaning it against his waist, Mike took his backpack from his shoulders and dragged it to his front. He opened the front pocket and took out a small paper bag. He gave it to Eleven.

Still smiling, she accepted the gift and opened the paper bag carefully. She peeked inside and looked at Mike with a curious expression.

She took her gift from inside the bag. It was a necklace painted in silver, with a small circular pendant.

“It's not much,” Mike said. “But... you know, circles... well, they don't end.”

Eleven giggled softly and gave the necklace to Mike. He frowned, confused.

“Put it on me,” she asked gently.

“Oh.” Mike blushed, his freckles brightening up on his cheekbones. “Okay.”

After Eleven pulled her hair away from her neck, Mike put his arms around her, holding the necklace steadily in his hands. He gulped and tried to lock it quickly.

He finally managed to do it, feeling his hands sweaty.

“Done.”

Eleven let her hair down and turned to him, but her eyes were on her necklace. She touched it.

“Thank you, Mike.”

Mike's blush went redder as he stuttered out, “Y-y-you're welcome, E-el.”

When they arrived at the arcade, Lucas, Will and Dustin were already there.

“Jesus, took you guys long enough!” Lucas complained. “Dustin has eaten half of our snacks.”

Dustin, who had a bag of chips in his hands, made an ugly face at Lucas. The other boy rolled his eyes.

“Let’s go in. I want to kill some zombies.”

October 2015

“So, you invited the playwright to your wedding?” Max sounded confused.

“We used to know each other,” Jane replied. “He... He was a good friend. A really good friend. And Gus didn’t mind, so...” She shrugged, ending her argument.

Max didn’t seem to be buying it. So, Jane decided it was time to change the topic before it got too personal.

“How about my bachelor’s party?”

Max smiled wickedly and waved her finger in a silent no.

“You ain’t getting anything out of me, miss.”

Jane laughed.

“At least, I tried,” she replied, holding her hands up as if in surrender. “But please no strippers, Max.”

Max puffed, rolling her eyes.

“Jesus, Jane, we’ve known each other since we’re fifteen. I think you’d have me in better consideration. I know you. I know you wouldn’t like strippers.”

Jane smiled thankfully.

“You’re so sweet to me.”

As a way of answering, Max stuck her tongue out, which got her friend to laugh again.

Jane had always been grateful for having Max in her life, for having met her that day in the school’s bathroom when she had had a crying crisis over the people she had left behind in Hawkins. Because Max gave her a shoulder to cry on and never once judged her for mourning a first, childish love. Heck, Max never judged her on *anything* she did since they first met.

“Anyways, don’t change the topic,” Max went back to what they were discussing.

Jane groaned, leaning back on her comfy, wheeled chair. They were at Jane’s office since two pm, dealing with paper and publicity companies so that Mike’s play could premiere as soon as possible.

“I want to understand why you invited a guy who have not seen in years to your wedding, which is happening in three weeks.”

“I...” Jane sighed. “Max, you wouldn’t understand.”

Max put a hand over her heart, offended.

“How long have you known me, Jane?”

“As long as I’ve not seen Mike.”

Max blinked. She lowered her hand to her lap and frowned, a deep wrinkle between her eyebrows showing. She started to think back at when she first met Jane, in the girls’ bathroom. She had been crying, holding on to-

“The necklace.”

Jane’s hand automatically flew to her chest, feeling the piece of jewellery under her blouse. Twelve years after Mike had put it on her, it was still there. It would always be there.

“It was him that gave it to you,” she remembered. She remembered

all the times Jane talked about the boy she had left behind in her old hometown. She had never said his name and Max had never bothered to ask about it.

Jane nodded, grasping the small, circular pendant through her blouse.

“Good Lord, Jane,” Max reprimanded, “you invited your first love to your wedding?! What the hell?!”

Jane lowered her eyes, almost in shame. She let go of the necklace and stood up, walking up to the small window in her office. Outside, down in the street, a big line of cars had formed as the traffic lights had yet changed to green.

“Jane, come on,” Max begged softly.

Jane crossed her arms in front of her stomach.

She had spent so many nights dreaming about Mike Wheeler after she moved away from Hawkins. It had hurt her so bad when her stepdad informed them, over dinner, that they would be moving to Chicago. She had told Mike this, but never gave him a date for her moving. Why had she done that? And why didn’t he ask about it now?

Mike had acted so normal during dinner, as if they had just been two childhood friends...

But they hadn’t just been that. They had been so much more.

“You’re going to regret this decision,” Max added in a sad tone of voice.

Jane looked over her shoulder.

“You don’t know him,” she replied.

Max remained quiet despite her facial expression showing that she wanted to say something. Jane was right: Max did not know who Mike Wheeler was except for the few things that Jane had told her about when they first met in sophomore year. He was a boy she had left in Hawkins. A boy she had loved. A boy she had had to forget.

Her first friend in the world. Her first love. To Max, Mike hadn't even had a name; he had just been Jane's first love. So, of course, as the years went by, Max forgot about the days Jane cried for her him. Then... then, Gus showed up.

"I thought you had completely forgotten him..."

Jane smiled sadly, turning around and leaning against the window's wooden frame. She looked over at her best friend. Max seemed deep in thoughts.

"But I guess... if you're still wearing the necklace, then..." She didn't finish the thought.

Jane didn't want her to finish it either.

"It's just an invitation to a wedding," she remarked.

"But-" Max pressed her lips together, keeping herself from saying something wrong or hurtful.

But it could go wrong.

And people could get hurt.

Present Time

"Dude, stop pacing."

Mike stopped for a second just to glare at his best friend. Then, he started pacing again.

Lucas sighed. Sitting next to him, Will was calling a pizza restaurant to get them to deliver two big pepperoni pizzas to where they were.

"We're in front of Hospital Saint-Mary." There was a quiet moment. "Why? Why are you asking us that? It's none of your business why we are asking for a pizza in front of a hospital, geez. Just brings us the pizzas."

Mike snorted at the conversation. He glanced at the hospital, which stood tall and large on the other side of the street. It was three in the morning. He should be in bed, like Luca and Will should too. He knew he couldn't go visit her at this hour, but he hadn't got the guts to leave that bench in front of the hospital since Max Winter had called him through Eleven's phone, telling him that Eleven had gone into labour that morning.

In the middle of the afternoon, Lucas and Will showed up to keep him company. But they had not known they would be keeping him company until three in the morning.

"Pizza will be here in thirty minutes."

"Oh my Good!" Lucas groaned and almost threw himself onto the floor. "I'm so hungry. For fuck's sakes, Mike, let's go home."

Will raised his eyebrows, offended.

"Now that I ordered the pizza?!"

"Well, we'll wait for the pizza, of course. I'm saying *after* it arrives."

Will seemed content with the plan. But Mike wasn't. He kept pacing, looking at the hospital, wondering in which floor she was; in which floor his son was. He had been waiting for this moment for months now, since Eleven showed up at his doorstep and told him she was pregnant. She hadn't been sure the baby was his, but, as she had told him, *she also just knew he was the father*. It had to be him.

But now, now he wanted to see the baby with his own eyes and be one hundred per cent sure that the kid was his son.

"You don't even know if the kid is yours," Lucas' voice woke him up from his thoughts.

"He is," Mike muttered. It didn't matter that one tiny part of him wasn't sure about that; he wouldn't show it to Lucas or Will.

"How do you know?"

"I just do. She just does."

Lucas puffed as he rolled his eyes. That was some dumb bullshit right there.

“You white people, honestly,” he complained.

“You know, this is why I’m gay,” Will intervened. Mike stopped pacing so that he could stare at his best friend with a weird look. “Guys can’t get pregnant, so you know... life’s easier if you want to fool around with someone that, for instance, is married or some-“

“Dude,” Lucas interrupted him, “you’re gay because Danny Carlson sucked your dick in ninth grade and you liked it.”

Will smiled proudly. Lucas puffed again, crossing his arms in front of his chest like a pouting kid who wanted a toy that his parents refused to buy him.

“This is ridiculous,” he murmured.

Will just sighed. Mike didn’t begin pacing again, but turned his back to his best friends and stared at the hospital.

It wasn’t just a want to see her, but a need. He needed to be with Eleven so bad. And see his son... He wanted to see his son, hold him for the first time, look at his face, see the resemblances-

He might not be his kid.

Mike shook his head. No, he wouldn’t let doubts destroy him. He had spent the entire pregnancy supporting Eleven, always so sure the baby was his... She had said it was; it had to be his.

But what if it was all wishful thinking? What if Mike had no part in Eleven’s life anymore? What if this was it, this was when they went separate ways again?

“Dude, I feel like you either are going to scream or cry,” Lucas suddenly said. “As your best friend and someone who does not want to go to jail tonight, I advise you to cry.”

“Fuck off, dude.”

There was a quiet moment between the three men.

“I’m Mike’s best friend,” Will suddenly remarked.

Lucas let out a fake laugh.

“Yeah, we’re not getting into that again. I’m his best friend.”

“Hum, no?” Will replied.

“Hum, yeah?”

“Actually,” Mike decided to say, turning to them, “Dustin’s my best friend.”

“Fuck you,” Lucas replied. “You’re just saying that because he’s miles away.”

Mike’s lips curled into a half-smile and Lucas knew he had been joking all along.

“Anyways, we really can’t stay all night here, Mike,” Lucas added.

Mike sighed.

“I know...”

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you for reading. I would like to hear on your thoughts on it.

From now on, I'll probably update once a week.

P.S. I cannot wait for Stranger Things' trailer!

3. Chapter 3

October 2015

They were having dinner again. This time it wasn't burgers, but a healthy with vegetables pasta dish. Jane had to make sure she would still fit in her bride's dress in two weeks.

God, she was getting married in two weeks and kept having dinner with Mike Wheeler. What was wrong with her?

It was the third time they had decided to go out for a meal. This time, it happened because Jane had stayed late in her office. When she decided to finally go home, she passed by the stage, always wanting to give it one last look before heading home. That's where she had found Mike, sitting in the middle of the wooden high floor, writing. Instead of leaving and pretending she had not seen him (why didn't she do that?), she called for him and here they were, eating Chinese food a few doors away from the theatre building.

"The crew is coming soon," Mike said. "I hope you don't mind, but you and your partner will most likely be invited to some sort of good-luck party? Well, it isn't really a party, it's more dinner, but Lucas likes to call it party. He believes he's still in college some days."

A giggle escaped from between Jane's lips. She bit her tongue and looked down at her plate which was filled with rice and bits of chicken soaked in an orange sauce.

"When are they arriving?" She asked.

"In... four days. Or, at least, that's what Will told me, but... well, you know, when I'm not around, some of them just decide to do whatever they want, and no one can control them." Mike sighed. "They're pains in the ass."

This time Jane bit her bottom lip hard so that she wouldn't giggle again.

"You were kind," she said. Mike looked at her, confused. "You,

Dustin, Lucas and Will... The four of you were something in your group: Lucas was.... Reason, Will was... heart, Dustin was..." She frowned a bit, trying to remember. "I think he was humour."

Mike chuckled, putting down the chopsticks. His plate was already empty.

"Yeah, Dustin was always the funny one. He kept us in a good mood."

Jane nodded, remembering that too. Then, a small smile appeared on her lips.

"And you..."

Mike looked up at her, expectant.

"You were kindness."

Mike blinked.

"K-kindness?" He stuttered as his face reddened.

Jane stared at him, noticing how his tiny freckles brightening up over the blush. She suddenly felt like an eleven-year-old, staring at her friend as he blushed over something she had said to him. Had she complimented him? Had she been the naïve girl she was and said something to get Mike to go red? What had happened? She couldn't remember now, but it surely meant something to her back then.

"Yes," Jane answered with a slight nod. "You were always so kind, Mike. I really liked your company because of that..."

Mike pressed his lips together, gazing at her through his eyelashes. He had huge eyelashes, Jane noticed. Why was she noticing all these trivial details about him?

"I don't know if it was all kindness," Mike replied.

Jane raised an eyebrow, confused.

"I just... I was kind to you for selfish reasons. I mean, I... I wanted to

be near you back then.”

Did he still want to be near her again?

Stop it, Jane.

“It wasn’t selfish,” she remarked. “You were kind to Lucas, Will, Dustin... Anyone I saw you interact with, really, it was obvious that you had kindness in you. It was really-“ She went quiet. Should she say it? Thirteen years had gone by since they first met, why not? Why not confess the things she hadn’t be able to confess then? “It may sound stupid what I’m going to say,” she warned him.

Mike smiled.

“I don’t believe it.”

Jane smiled back.

“I think... I think I loved you, Mike. I think I loved you a lot.”

Mike blinked. He looked down for a second, gathering his thoughts on what she had just confessed, before contemplating her again. There was something in his eyes that Jane couldn’t quite understand. If they were still kids, she would have read him easily. Now, now she didn’t know him.

“I...” Mike started. Jane straightened up her back. She felt nervous. Why was she so nervous? “I loved you too.”

That was why she was nervous.

Her heart skipped a beat as Mike looked away again, trying to keep his face from going red with embarrassment. There was no need to be embarrassed about feelings that no longer existed.

“I always wondered about that,” Jane admitted next. “About how deep our feelings really were.”

Mike’s lips curled into a small, almost sad smile.

“Can I be honest?”

Jane nodded. She felt her heart's pace sped up.

"Back then, what I felt for you... Well, it... it made me feel like I could fight the world. You were my first love, and... honestly, El –" She felt goosebumps after hearing him calling her that old nickname – "if you hadn't moved away, if you hadn't kept from me where you were going..., I think... I think it wouldn't be just a first love now." He looked up at her, worried. "Would it?"

Jane refused to say anything at first. She couldn't let herself agree with him; not when her wedding was two weeks away.

Whatever they had was gone lost. It was stuck in the past, in their childhood. They weren't kids anymore, they had different lives. Jane had Gus and her theatre building, Mike had his writing and crew.

"I guess... we'll never know," the words slipped from her mouth before she realized what she was saying.

She was rejecting him.

Mike's eyes, which had been hopeful, turned away from her, hurt.

"I guess."

June 2004

They were twelve now. Twelve was weird. Because Jane had known that Mike was special to her, but now... now her mind and heart demanded that she showed him that specialness.

She wanted to kiss his cheekbones as many times as possible. She wanted to hold his hand more often, even in front of his friends. She wanted to whisper in his ear and smile when he blushed with their closeness. She wanted *him* to do the same things to her.

Was it wrong? She wanted to ask her mother about it, but she didn't have the guts to do so. If she told her about it, then she would have to tell about Mike, and her mother would probably tell Martin. Martin would be mad that Jane had been going outside the property

without telling them.

After giving Mike a call, warning him she would be back in five days, they made plans to meet each other by the wire fence and then go to the lake for a day out. Just the two of them.

Jane woke up early on that morning. She got out of her bed, which, at least, more two people, could sleep in, and went to open the big, curved window in her bedroom. She opened it and felt the temperature hitting her face. It was hot outside, yet there was a light breeze. It was good. She smiled.

Going to the bathroom for a quick shower, Jane took the clothes she would be wearing on that day: a bikini and a white dress. She already had her beach towel hidden inside a backpack.

The gardener would let her out today, like he always did, around two pm. Then, she had to be back at six. Her stepdad would come pick her and her mother up around seven since he wanted to take them out for dinner somewhere. She hated family dinners in public. Martin always tried to show himself off while her mother tried to pretend she wasn't embarrassed, and Jane just really wanted to leave the place.

Breakfast could be a lonely time, yet Jane enjoyed it a lot. Since it was summer and she was allowed to wake up at any hour she wanted, she and her mother barely had breakfast together. Jane was usually entertained by the maids who stayed with her and told her funny stories that happened to them back at their houses.

Today, however, they had things to prepare and left the radio turned on so that Jane didn't feel so alone.

She was pouring herself another glass of lemonade when the man on the radio announced a full half hour of consecutive songs. Then, a song started to play, and Jane recognize the beat and the voice of the singer.

She hummed the song as she ate another piece of French toast, and mumbled some lyrics in the few moments her mouth was empty.

"That promises forever young, some people..." She hummed the rest as she cleaned her mouth with a napkin.

One of the maids showed up right as she stood up.

"Thank you so much for the breakfast, Lucy," Jane thanked with a polite smile.

The young maid laid a hand on the girl's soft curly hair and smiled back.

"You're welcome, sweetie."

"I'll be in my room, okay?" Jane warned. "In case my mom asks?"

Lucy nodded and went to the table to clear everything up.

Jane had a radio on her bedroom as well. She had everything on her bedroom since her stepdad was a, well, generous man that wanted her to have everything. No matter how many years she had spent in that bedroom, for some reason, it still didn't feel like hers.

She turned the radio on, found the station it had been on downstairs, and listened to the half-an-hour consecutive songs. Yet, the other song, the first one she had heard, was still stuck in her head, as she cleaned her bedroom a bit. It was the maids' job to do so, as Martin always reminded her, but Jane felt bored when she was stuck in that huge mansion with miles and miles of gardens, and cleaning the room wasn't that bad.

During lunch hour, she and her mother sat side by side to eat. Terry Brenner asked her daughter about her morning and what she was going to do during the afternoon. Jane lied and said she would go wander around the property. She had yet discovered all secrets about it (she actually had, a long time ago), and wanted to explore a bit more. Terry seemed happy and replied she would be out all afternoon shopping with her friends.

Good, you won't be looking for me, Jane thought. Outside, she hummed the song she had heard that morning during breakfast.

"Oh, I know that beat," Terry commented.

Jane took a sip of her orange juice before saying, "It was on the radio this morning. I don't know the name."

"Hum a bit more."

So, Jane did. But her mother didn't get to lyrics nor the singer's name.

Around two pm, she met with the gardener near the wire fence. He let her out through the backdoor he used to get to work. It was a big gate which also led to the underground garage. Martin and the gardener were the only two who had the keys for that gate.

"Thank you, Jerry," Jane thanked as she crossed the small gap that the gardener had opened in the gate.

"You're welcome. Remember, be back at six!"

"I will!" She waved at the gardener before running down the wire fence's track. She soon got to the place she always met up with Mike. He wasn't there yet. They had agreed to meet at 14:14.

As she waited for Mike to arrive, Jane sat down on a rock and took out the necklace he had given her last year from inside her dress. She kept it hidden because of Martin and her mother. They could ask about it and she wouldn't know what to say; usually it was them who bought them jewelry.

She played with necklace, rubbing it with her thumb over and over. Then, she leaned it against her cheek. It was a bit warm, yet it still had that sensation of coldness in it.

Finally, there was the unmistakable sound of something stepping on dry leaves and on fallen tree branches. She stood up and smiled when Mike showed up from between two trees, pulling his bike with him. She noticed right away that he was taller. So much taller since the last time she saw him during Easter holidays.

Jane approached him happily.

"You're ready to go, El?" He asked with a big grin.

“Not yet,” she said.

Mike frowned, confused.

“What do you-“

He got interrupted with two arms wrapping around his neck and pulling him to a crushing hug.

Mike let his bike fall on the dirt ground. He hugged Eleven back and smiled contently.

“I missed you,” she confessed as she pulled back.

Her words got the reaction she wanted from Mike. He opened his mouth to say something, but no sound came out. He blushed deeply as his freckles contrasted beautifully with the redness of his cheekbones.

“I missed you too, El,” he admitted timidly. “Are... are you ready to go now?”

She nodded excitedly.

“Now, I am.”

The journey to the lake was a short one once they managed to get to a good pavement and Mike hopped on his bike. Eleven sat behind him, gripping her hands tightly on his t-shirt. It was always exciting to ride a bike with Mike. He was careful most of the time, except for when they both agreed to speed up.

The lake was almost empty. It was still early in June and most kids were still adapting to their vacation-mood, enjoying first a few days at home without a schedule instead of going out with their friends. Mike explained to Eleven that there was also some kind of fair going on in downtown, so most people were there.

“Maybe we can go there?” He asked.

Eleven nodded with a happy smile.

“I’d love to.”

They found a nice spot under a tree, not far from the lake’s borders. Mike rested his bike against it and then, he and Eleven took out their beach towels and spread them on the grass.

Mike turned around when the girl took off her dress. He kept his blush under control as he took off his t-shirt and toed off his sneakers like he mother hated that he did. She always said to undo the shoelaces before taking off the shoes, but Mike almost never did it.

“Let’s go to the water?” He asked.

Eleven nodded happily. Grabbing his hand before he could even notice (and, when he did, he blushed), they walked up to the lake. They tested the water with their toes and Mike pretended to shiver.

“It’s a bit cold.”

“It’s good once you get in,” Eleven replied.

He nodded.

Slowly, they found their way under the water, holding on to each other’s hands for safety even though the water’s level was up to their stomach. There were a few kids playing around in the water, but they were far from where Mike and Eleven stood. It gave them the right privacy they wanted.

Eleven felt the hard sand and the small rocks under her feet as she moved closer to Mike. She had a tiny smile on her lips, and the boy gazed at her with a curious, yet fascinated look.

“What is it?” He asked.

To his surprise, Eleven started to hum a song that he did not recognize as she moved around him. She leaned on her back and swam for a bit, never swaying away from Mike. She felt content, feeling the cold water on her head and enjoying the light breeze on the tip of her nose. Her eyes had a direct vision to the blue sky, yet she would glance at Mike, blushing every time her eyes met his. The humming song never left her mouth.

Mike was a bit open-mouthed as he stared at her, one hundred per cent sure he was looking at the prettiest girl in the world.

“What song is that?” He asked after listening to her hum for a while.

“I listened to it on the radio this morning. I don’t remember the lyrics or the singer,” Eleven explained as she straightened up, her feet touching the hard ground again.

“Well,” Mike started with a sad expression, “I don’t recognize it at all.”

Eleven smiled and raised a hand - drops of water dripping from it – to touch Mike’s still dry face. He shivered a bit at the cold touch. She giggled.

“Maybe tomorrow it will be on the radio again,” Eleven replied. “Then, I’ll tell you which song is.”

Mike smiled back.

“Cool.”

“Cool,” she repeated softly.

October 2015

She was agape upon seeing Lucas and Will arriving at her theatre building. Mike had called her and Max to come meet the crew. Jane didn’t recognize most people, just the two of them: Lucas and Will. They had been friends. Well, sort of. But they had got along.

The tall, dark-skinned man, who she once knew as the suspicious young boy, looked her down and up with a frowning expression. The skinny brown-haired man with a sweet face to look at, who she once saw as the tiniest and softest kid in the group, gave her a careful smile just like two old friends who had not seen each other in years and weren’t sure how to react to one another.

Mike introduce the two women to all the people who had arrived.

Most of them were friendly, approaching them to give them a handshake, some were shy and stayed behind, waving at them; when it came to Lucas and Will, they smiled politely at Max and then, after Will took the first step, they both approached Jane and shook her hand. Will even patted her shoulder, smiling cautiously.

“How have you been?” He asked.

“Good, good,” she answered. Her eyes shifted quickly over to where Mike was, making small chat with Max and other two crew members. “And you guys?”

Lucas snorted, a bit tense. He had taken a few steps back and put his hands inside his jacket’s pockets, clearly trying to say *we are not old friends*.

“We’ve been following Mike around, so-“ He shrugged –“It’s like the old days.”

Jane forced a tiny smile.

“But life’s good,” Will added. Finally, he noticed the shiny ring on her left hand. “And congratulations.”

Lucas’ eyes lowered to her hand too. He seemed surprised at first. Then, his shoulders relaxed a bit. Or, at least, that was what Jane’s eyes saw.

“When are you getting married?” Lucas asked.

“Oh, thirteen days,” she answered.

“Congrats,” he said with a smile. And this time, she saw that he actually meant it.

“Thank you,” she murmured, a sickening feel deepening in her stomach. Why did she feel so bad about something that had made her so happy until now?

“You guys want to grab lunch all together?” Max suggested loud enough for Jane to hear.

She cursed internally. Why was Max such a social butterfly?

They went to have lunch on a diner nearby that had amazing sandwiches and a delicious chocolate cake for dessert. Jane and Max usually ate there when it was just the two of them and they didn't have much time for a lunch break.

For the entire group to sit down together, the waiters had to pull two tables together. Ironically, Jane got a seat next to Mike. They shared a shy smile before turning to people on the table. At least, she had Max sitting on her right.

The waitress came to deliver a few menus to the group. Mike grabbed one and tried to share it with Jane, but she shook her head, saying she already knew what she was going to get. She usually had a tuna sandwich and Max a seafood sandwich.

"What's your opinion on the chicken sandwich?" Mike asked her, his elbow touching hers slightly.

Jane looked at his menu and shrugged.

"It's good. I would take the bacon one, though. They have some kind of sauce in it that is really, really heavenly."

"Really, really?" Mike teased, putting the menu down.

Jane smiled at him and hit her elbow against his.

"Really, really."

"Then, I'll get that one," he replied with a grin.

Jane could not stop staring at his lips, how they curled into a happy, yet teasing smile. Mike didn't look away either, studying her face as she studied his. They had grown so much. They had been apart so many years. They were strangers. Well, they had to be. Then, why did she feel like she was...

Comfortable.

Safe.

Home.

Jane finally broke away from Mike's taunting eyes and turned to Max, who was telling some of the people, including Will and Lucas, a funny story from when she and Jane had got lost inside their own theatre building, back in the days it was still being restored.

"Basically, we're stuck in the dark for like, what, five hours?" Max looked at Jane for confirmation.

Jane rolled her eyes.

"Don't tell our guests the bad stories, Max."

"What are you talking about? This one is one of the bests!"

That set out a wave of laughs around the table.

The waiter came to take their orders. Mike did order the bacon sandwich and Jane pretended she didn't feel happy about it.

In order to avoid looking at him, Jane tried to mingle with the rest of the crew, trying to actually get to know the people who were going to stay in the second floor of the theatre building for the next month.

God, a whole month. Mike would be around for such a long time. How was she going to deal with it?

Like a grown woman who is about to become a wife, Jane, she told herself.

She wasn't fourteen anymore. It didn't matter that Mike's confession on their third meal together had turned into dreams at night, or daydreams during the office hours. It did not matter because she had rejected him; she had reduced what they had had to a simply first love story.

And that was what it had been, a first love. They were nothing more.

"We're actually thinking about premiering the play in two weeks," Lucas said loudly enough that Jane woke up from her thoughts. "We have to rehearsal a bit and Will and James have to check the

settings.”

“Yeah, we have to redo one or two things,” Will added.

“Two weeks?” Max turned to Jane. “You won’t be here in two weeks, will you?”

Jane shook her head.

“No, honeymoon.”

She felt Mike’s arm, which had been slightly touching hers, moving away as the man himself stood up. He muttered something about the bathroom and left the table.

“Where are you guys going?” One of the actresses asked.

“Oh, Europe. Italy.”

“Oh, fancy.”

Jane forced a smile.

It didn’t matter that it had been Martin’s influencing voice that convinced her soon-to-be-husband to convince her to have their honeymoon in a small town in Italy since her stepfather had a house there he could borrow them. It didn’t matter because life was good as it had been for the past eight years. For the past four years since she and Gus started dating.

Mike returned shortly after. He sat down next to Jane and she noticed how he kept a bit more distance between their arms. She didn’t like it.

As the conversation moved on to other topics and people got immersed in their own little chats, Jane took the opportunity to look at Mike. He wasn’t talking to anyone. Actually, he had picked his phone out of his jeans and kept texting someone.

Did he have a girlfriend, after all?

It didn’t matter, though. At least, not to Jane. It couldn’t. She was

engaged. Who cared that her first love had a girlfriend as an adult? She didn't. She couldn't. Life went on, right? If she had done that, why couldn't-

Mike put down his phone and then rested his chin on his hand, trying to pay attention to any of the other people's conversations. Lucas, Will and Max were talking about their college experience. Three of the actors whose names Jane did not remember were talking about going for a walk and getting to know Chicago since they hadn't been there before. Jane couldn't get what the other end of the table was chatting about, and neither could Mike who turned his head a bit into her direction as he tried to listen to his childhood friends' talk.

Jane wanted to say something to him. Maybe she could ask him about the life on the road. He had told her how he spent most of the year in tour and the rest-

She bit her tongue. No, she wasn't going to ask that.

Mike chuckled softly at something that was said that Jane didn't catch. She glanced over at him. Their eyes met. The good mood in Mike's brown eyes got lost as he uncurled his soft smile. Jane understood that she had hurt him. And she knew it had been because of her rejection a few days ago.

She should fix it.

"Where are you going next?" She found herself saying.

Mike blinked, lowering his arm and leaning back on the chair. He looked at her, confused.

"I don't know. This is our last stop, actually," he said. "We weren't going to do it, but Will found your theatre building online and, since we've never been to Chicago, we thought: why not?"

Jane nodded slightly, listening carefully.

"Chicago's great," she replied, and then regretted it because it was a really dumb thing to say. "I mean, If you find yourself liking it and all that." Why did she make it even worse?

To her surprise, Mike's lips curled into a small smile. He was amused.

"You like it here?"

Jane nodded.

"Yeah, I mean... It's big and... there's always some place you haven't seen yet."

Mike's smile grew wider.

"Maybe I'll check it around while we're still here."

"Yeah, you do that," she remarked, forbidding herself from saying *Sure, I'll tag along if you want to.*

These thoughts were getting out of hand. As she stared once again at Mike, whose eyes had yet left her face, she felt a bit scared: not a bad scared, but a nice one, like... like they were going to be kids again.

Present Day

Jane's mother came to pick her up the following day. Gus was still stuck on some meeting with her stepdad and Jane didn't feel like waiting around in the hospital for him to come take her home. Her mother was available (and with that she meant that her mother's driver was available), so she got a ride home early in the afternoon.

"Do you need anything?" Terry Brenner asked her daughter as soon as they arrived at Jane's house. She and Gus lived a few streets away from her mother and stepdad, having the house been a promotion gift from Martin Brenner to young Gus last year. Until then, the couple had lived in a flat which wasn't far away from there, but it was far enough that Jane felt like she wasn't living under her stepdad's eyes. Now, now it was just a constant feeling of being watched over.

"No," Jane replied as she climbed up the stairs with little Dylan in her arms. He was still sleeping, having been fed on the hospital before her mother had arrived.

She walked down the corridor to the room next to her and Gus'. There was a big, fluffy tiger painted on the door. Jane stopped and stared at it. Will had done it when she was six-months pregnant. Gus had been there that day, making small chat with the painter as he did the baby's room's door. He had thought Will was nice. Will was doing it after a Mike's request.

Jane closed her eyes for a second. Mike hadn't come see them yet. She knew it wasn't because he didn't want to. He was afraid, as she had been when the waters broke. They spent the last months believing the baby was Mike's without any doubt, yet, in the moment of truth, Jane had been scared that she had been wrong. Mike had probably felt that same fear. He also knew that Gus and her family would be around more often. He couldn't just barge in and demand to see the baby. They were just old friends; old friends that had met each other again by accident two years ago and kept in touch as he had stayed in town after his play's exhibition on her theatre was done.

Jane opened her eyes and looked at her baby. The few black strands of hair on his head said it all: Gus was blonde and Jane had light brown hair. Dylan was Mike's son.

"Jane?"

Jane almost jumped surprised. Her son felt her body shake and moved his tiny head, letting out an almost inaudible sound. She stopped still, waiting for him to relax again. He did.

Her mother had come upstairs as well, and was now looking at her with a frowning expression.

"Don't you want to put the baby down on his crib?"

Jane nodded. Slowly, she opened the bedroom's door. Dylan's bedroom was painted in a light green. His wooden crib, with yellow blankets, stood in the middle of the room as his wardrobe was on the right side of it, resting against the wall. There was an armchair as well in there. Gus had asked to put it there since it would be comfortable for Jane to sit on it with the baby.

Jane laid little Dylan on the crib and pulled the blanket over him. She waited a few seconds, making sure he stayed put, before walking out the room and meeting her mother in the house's study room. Gus usually used it for his long nights of working and skype meetings. Jane used it to read.

There was an old black leather sofa on the left side of the study. Her mother had sat there, waiting for her. Jane sighed, let the room's door a bit opened in case Dylan woke up, and then walked up to her mother. She took the seat next to her, feeling anxious. The fact that she had barely slept last night didn't help to the nauseating feeling in her stomach.

"I think we need to talk," Terry Brenner started.

Jane closed her eyes and nodded, agreeing.

"So, who is it?"

Jane took a deep breath.

"Mike Wheeler," she answered.

Her mother didn't say anything. She opened her eyes. Terry looked confused.

"The... playwright who supposedly is an old friend of yours?"

"He is an old friend," Jane replied. "He was a friend of mine in Hawkins."

Terry blinked. After all these years, she had not known about her daughter's escaping hours from the huge property Martin Brenner had owned in Hawkins. They had lived there for seven years.

"How was he your friend there?"

"I met him by the wire fence on the south side of the property."

Terry raised a hand to her mouth, shocked. Jane sighed, frustrated.

"I was never allowed outside! I had to do something, so I sneaked out

for a couple of hours to play with Mike.”

Terry pressed her lips together in a thin, serious line, and frowned her eyebrows deep. She was divided between being mad at something her daughter did years ago and talking about the big problem here. They had to talk about it.

“And now?” She asked. “Now what is he?”

“He’s... He was... I-“ Jane sighed, hiding her face behind her hands. She felt like crying. –“Mom, he’s... I loved him and...”

“Do you love him now?” Terry asked.

Jane lowered her hands and looked at her mother with tears in her eyes. She nodded slightly.

Terry blinked.

“What about Gus?”

Jane stood up and walked to the other side of the study room. She had to have some space between her and her mother.

“I love Gus too,” Jane said. Then, she turned to her mother, resting against the desk her husband so many nights used to work. “But... Mike... Mom, it’s like... it’s like, if there was such a thing as soulmates, he would be mine.”

Terry remained quiet. She remembered how Jane had always been fascinated with soulmates’ myths and true love stories when she was a little girl. When she first introduced Martin to her daughter, she told Jane that he was her soulmate. That had made Jane a bit less doubtful of the strange man who was going to become her new father. Of course, their relationship never matched up the one that Terry had idealized for them. Jane was always to reserve for her own good and didn’t let Martin in so easily. Martin, thank God, accepted the girl as she was and always told Terry that it was okay. He didn’t mind not being called dad as long as the girl was happy.

Now, her little girl was no longer a baby, nor a child who was lost in soulmates’ myths and true love stories, but she still believed in them

despite her adult and pragmatic attitude. Jane was a romantic at heart, yet, Terry suddenly realized (it had been always right under her nose, though) that Jane never once compared Gus to a soulmate. Even after they were married, Jane never said Gus was her soulmate. Or, if there were such things as soulmates, that he would be it.

“A soulmate?” Terry finally said.

Jane stared at her mother, scared.

“Please, don’t tell anyone, Mom.”

Terry blinked. She looked down at her hands; her long beautiful hands which were turning into an old lady’s hands. Her nails were polished and painted red.

“Not even Martin,” Jane finally added.

Because if Martin knew, he would destroy them.

Terry looked up, frowning.

“He’s my husband.”

“And I’m your daughter.”

“Jane-“

“Mom, please.” Jane approached her mother again. Instead of sitting down next to her, she went on her knees and grabbed her mother’s hands. “Please, Mom. Please.”

“But...” Terry didn’t know what to do or say. “But... Won’t the man want the child to be his?”

Jane nodded.

“He does, but... he... he understands, Mom, he understands how complicated this all thing is.”

Terry frowned, confused.

Of course, she was confused. She didn’t see the all picture like Jane

did. She didn't understand what kind of man she had married. Martin Brenner had everyone in his life wrapped around his little finger. They were like his puppets, whose lives depended on him. Gus had a job and a house because of Martin. Jane had her dream job and everything she ever wanted since she was a little girl because of Martin. Terry had the life she ever wished for because of Martin. Martin Brenner and his stupid money.

If he found out about the baby belonging to other man than was not Gus, he would destroy them. Gus would no longer be family to Brenner, so he would lose his job, his wife and his house. Jane would most likely lose her theatre building, and her husband, and probably Mike... Martin would shorten the leash on her, make her live by his rules because she had screwed up. After years of giving her everything she wanted, Jane was still not the perfect girl Martin Brenner would want as a stepdaughter.

"Please, Mom."

Terry looked at her daughter.

"Please, don't tell anyone."

Notes for the Chapter:

I hope you enjoyed this chapter. If there are any grammar mistakes, I apologize. I just get tired of re-reading the same chapter over and over (And believe me, I re-read these chapters a lot!)

I'd be grateful if you told me your thoughts on it!

P.S. The trailer was so amazing!

4. Chapter 4

Notes for the Chapter:

I said I was going to update weekly, and I'm trying to, but I also promised myself that when I was writing chapter 5 that I would post chapter 4, so here it is...

July 2004

Jane had to buy the gardener's help this time. She took money from her piggy bank and gave it to the man in order to get his key borrowed for a night. The gardener had had no desire to help her out this time because giving her his keys could cause a lot of trouble if someone found out. But Jane could be very persistent. She wanted to go to the fair with Mike and the fair, according to the boy, was the best during the night hours. There was no way she could sneak from the house without Jerry's keys.

She and Mike promised to meet each other at 21:21 by the wire fence.

Jane had spent the past three days at home, always coming up with ideas to spend time with her mother, even talking to Martin more than the usual, so that they would be, well, happier with her attitude. That way, when she pretended to be sleepy around nine pm and blame the long game of golf she had played with Martin that afternoon (it had been so boring), the couple would just smile at her and say good night without an inch of suspicion.

Jane went to her bedroom, put one of her old child-sized dolls under the covers in her bed, and then grabbed her jacket and shoes. She left the house barefoot, slowly, quietly, through the kitchen's door. When she found herself at a safe distance, she put on her shoes and her jacket, made sure she had Jerry's keys and money in her pockets and then ran as fast as she could to the garage's gate.

As soon as she closed the gate behind her, she felt relief invade her nervous stomach. For there on, it would be easy. She followed the

wire fence to her spot with Mike. He was already there, standing on his bike, with his feet on the ground to keep him balance. He had a shirt she had never seen him wear: it was dark-blue with little yellow dots. She smiled.

“It’s cute,” she said.

It was dark, but even so Eleven could see how Mike’s cheekbones turned red.

“You’re cute,” he mumbled back. “I mean, your dress and- Yeah.”

Eleven’s smile grew. She was wearing a green dress which was a bit shorter than the usual, leaving her knees uncovered. It had two long dark green strips around her waist, which tied together on a ribbon behind her back. She had made an effort to look nice tonight, even had her curly hair done. As a way to spend the time with her mother that morning, she had asked her to do her hair into two tiny braids. Terry had been delighted to do it since Jane was always very sensitive when it came to her hair and didn’t usually let people touch it.

“But...” Eleven bit her bottom lip, shy, her hips swaying slightly. “Do I look pretty?”

Mike blinked and started nodding.

“Yes, really pretty!” He exclaimed. “You always look pretty, El.”

Eleven blushed as a tiny, happy smile appeared on her soft lips.

They moved away from the wire fence after a few moments of awkward silence in which both wanted to say something more, but didn’t know what. Eleven helped Mike pull his bike until they found good ground to ride on. Then, she sat behind him and wrapped her arms around his torso.

Her stomach was bubbling in anticipation. She had never been to a small town’s fair before, especially on a date. Even though neither had said it out loud, they both knew it was a date. Their first date ever.

The fair was downtown, in one of the town's biggest parks. Mike stopped his bike right before they got into a messy street, filled with moving people, small colourful stands and noise. Eleven looked at him, confused.

"Better hide the bike here –" he pointed at an alley on their right – "instead of going in with it. It's too crowded," he explained with a soft smile.

She nodded.

After leaving Mike's bike locked to metal post next to a couple of other bikes, they moved forwards into the noisy street. Eleven's hand found Mike's and they intertwined their fingers together, scared that they would lose each other in the middle of the crowd.

The park's entrance was right at the end of that street. There were a lot of people stopping by the small stands of food and candies. Eleven was mesmerized for a second, looking at one particular stand which did not sell food, but jewellery. She touched the necklace she had not bothered to hide under the dress.

"El?" Mike called, feeling her hand pulling him back. "Are you okay?"

Eleven pointed at the stand.

"Can we see that?"

"Ah, sure."

They looked at the stand's content for a while as the seller – a woman in her forties with a kind smile on her face – waited patiently for a good moment to intervene.

Eleven was looking at the rings, biting her bottom lip. Then, she looked at the bracelets. Some were brown, made of leather, and others were made of metal. She glanced at Mike, catching him staring at her with gentle eyes. When he was caught, the boy blushed and looked away.

"Do you want a bracelet?" She asked.

Mike frowned.

“I don’t have that kind of money to spend tonight, and I really wanted to take you to the Ferris wheel-“

Eleven shook her head, interrupting his speech. She opened the left pocket of her jacket and took out a small roundish wallet.

“I’m getting us friendship bracelets,” she stated before picking out two black bracelets made of leather which had a small metal locket. She showed them to the seller lady, who had approached them quietly after hearing Eleven’s statement. “How much will it be?”

The lady offered them a smile before saying, “Five dollars.”

Mike’s eyes widened open.

“That’s too-“

“Shush,” Eleven shut him and gave the lady five dollars. “Thank you.”

“Thank you,” the lady replied.

Eleven and Mike moved away from the stand. After putting her wallet back in her pocket, Eleven grabbed Mike’s left wrist and put on his new bracelet. Then, she raised both her hands, one showing off the bracelet that was for her and the other, the wrist.

Mike was a bit agape with the fact that she had just spent five dollars on two bracelets for them, but he took the piece of jewellery from her hand and put it on her left wrist carefully.

Eleven smiled widely.

“This is a promise, Mike Wheeler: we’ll never forget each other.”

Mike stared at her for a few moments before nodding in agreement and grabbing her hand again.

“We’ll never forget each other.”

October 2015

It was her bachelor's party and she wasn't having any kind of fun. She was going to get married tomorrow and she just felt like getting into a taxi and go somewhere no one could find her.

Was it normal to feel like this? Was it normal that she was rewinding her entire relationship with Gus, asking herself if this was the right thing to do? If he was the right guy to marry? Every time that question popped out in her mind, it was followed by an image of a smiling Mike Wheeler. Whenever that happened, she took a sip of her martini. She was still on her third drink while the rest of the women present – Max, a couple of college friends and her cousin Mandy – were already on their fifth or sixth glass of alcohol. They were at a restaurant, one of Jane's favourites, which had a great steak with French fries dish (of course, she had ordered that), since around eight pm. If they bothered to look at the big squarish clock on the wall over the counter, they would see it was almost midnight. No one else was at the restaurant, most of it being cleaned up by the employees who were just waiting for them to decide to go out and party somewhere else.

But Jane didn't feel like partying. Quietly, she left her eyes wandered around the table, looking at every friend of hers that had come to her bachelor's party. She didn't have many friends; she was never a social butterfly like Max, and socializing was an act of terror for her. Most people she hung out with had outgoing personalities and had been the ones that most likely made a move to become Jane's friend. She just didn't know how to do that. Not even when she and Mike first became friends.

Mike.

There it was, his face once again haunting her mind; his stupid smile taking her back to the days when they were two kids in love with each other, stealing innocent kisses when no one was looking. They had made so many promises to each other and Jane had broken them all on the day she had decided not to tell Mike when she was moving away. The boy had known she was leaving Hawkins, but back then

he had believed they still had the summer – one last summer – to enjoy each other's company. They didn't have it.

Jane looked at her phone, which was resting on the table, next to her empty dessert plate. She had got Mike's number a few days after they had made arrangements for his play to be acted out in her theatre building. She had not once used it, nor had she been tempted to until today. Until now. She wanted to see him.

As a soon-to-be-bride didn't she get to have all her wishes come true?

Jane grabbed her martini glass and drank the rest of the drink in one long sip. She wouldn't do it. There were some wishes she couldn't even dream of ask for in the first place.

"Janeeeee!" Max called out drunk. There was a nice waiter with a scared expression standing next to her. "This man here says we gotta go?"

Jane sighed.

"Okay, let's go."

As soon as they found themselves on the street, her cousin Mandy attached herself to a street cabinet and started singing the wedding march. The rest of the girls joined in and Max pulled Jane to a firm hug, singing badly the song into her ear.

"You're terrible," Jane remarked.

Max pulled back and kissed Jane's cheek loudly.

"Let's go dancing?" She asked.

Jane forced a smile. She really just wanted to go back to the stupid hotel room that her mother had booked for her. It was bad luck to sleep with the groom on the night before the wedding, Terry Ives had said. Everything felt like bad luck right now to Jane.

"Sure, why not?"

After getting a taxi, Jane put up with a ten-minute ride to a

nightclub, surrounded by drunk people who seemed to be happier about her wedding than she was.

Jane's phone, which she gripped tensely in her left hand, felt like a temptation every second that went by. One phone call.

Do it, Jane.

No, she couldn't.

The taxi came to a soft stop and the driver turned to her, with his hand stretched out to receive the money. Jane, who had taken the front seat, opened her purse and paid the man. He smiled a bit forcedly and wished them a good night.

One call and it could be a good night.

Stop it, Eleven.

Jane stopped still in the middle of the walkway. Behind her, the two taxis that had got them there drove away. Around her, her friends and cousin were talking loudly and happily, excited for a night-out dancing and maybe making-out with strangers. Jane just stopped.

Eleven.

She had been Eleven for Mike once. How she had loved to be his Eleven. His wish from the wish hour.

She was just Jane now. Old Jane Ives who had refused to get her future husband's last name for no logic reason, according to her stepfather and soon to be in-laws. She liked being Jane Ives just fine. Ives was her mother's last name and that meant a lot to Jane, keeping it. No matter how much she loved her fiancé, her mother came first and Ives was just a way to show it.

"Jane, are you okay?" Max suddenly showed up in front of her, with a worried, yet out of focus look. "Do you need anything?"

Jane was about to open her mouth to say that everything was okay and they could go in when something inside her stopped her. She licked her lips, buying herself some time, and then she replied,

“Actually, I need some air. You guys can go in. I’ll be right behind you.”

Max frowned, suspicious.

“Are you sure?” She asked.

Jane nodded, gripping tightly her cell phone on her hand.

“One hundred per cent. Just go.”

Jane watched her friends approached the bouncer at the nightclub’s door. They talked for a bit, each showing their I.D. and then got inside. Max sent her one last look and Jane forced a smile.

Once they were out of sight, Jane turned around and made her way to the nearest bench. She sat down and looked at her cell phone.

Just one call.

“I’ll never forget you, El,” Mike promised, a hand touching her cheek. “I could never forget you.”

Jane closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

They had had so many promises.... She broke them all.

Taking one last look at her cell phone, Jane finally got the guts to search in her contact list for Mike Wheeler’s name. She pressed call and raised the phone to her right ear.

Her foot started tapping on the floor as she heard the ringing.

Maybe he wouldn’t pick up. And maybe that would be for the best because Jane was getting married tomorrow and-

“Hello?”

“Mike,” she let out after hearing his voice.

“Eleven?”

Jane found herself smiling.

“You will always call me that, won’t you?”

There was a quiet moment.

“I... I guess I will.” He cleared his throat. “Why are you calling me after midnight?”

“It’s my bachelor’s party,” she confessed.

Mike didn’t say anything in return.

“I’m not drunk calling you if that’s what worries you,” Jane added as a joke to light up the mood.

But Mike didn’t chuckle.

“Then, why are you calling me?”

That was indeed a good question. Jane had no answer for it. Well, she had, but it was stupid and irrational, considering she was a twenty-three-year old woman who was about to get married to who was supposed to be the man of her dreams and, yet, here she was, calling some other guy.

But it wasn’t just some other guy; it was Mike.

“Eleven?” Mike called, worried.

“I... I just wanted to talk to you, Mike. I...” She should go inside and dance until five am with her friends and cousin. She should hang up at that right moment and pretend she did not call Mike on the night before her wedding. But did she do it? Of course not. “I want to see you.”

“R-right now?”

“Yes,” she said before she lost her courage. “Please.”

Mike didn’t say anything at first. Jane bit her bottom lip, waiting and losing hope. She shouldn’t have said that. She-

“Okay,” Mike finally agreed. “Where do you want to meet?”

She was about to reply her hotel room, but then remembered that could go wrong in so many ways.

“My theatre building,” she replied. “I... There’s a place I want to show you.”

“Okay,” Mike repeated. “I’m already in here, in my room, so...”

“Fifteen minutes and I’ll be there,” Jane promised.

She hung up and stood up. There was a line of parked taxis on the other side of the street. The crosswalk was a few steps away from where she was. Jane hesitated.

Did she really want to go? Well, yes, that she did. The question was: should she go?

Well, you’re giving yourself a lot of shoulds tonight, and most of them are against Mike, so..., she rationalized. Of course, she shouldn’t. Of course, it was wrong to do it, to get in a taxi and go meet Mike.

But, good Lord, she wanted to. She wanted to see him so bad.

So, Jane found herself crossing the street and getting into the first available taxi. She gave the middle-aged man the address to Theatre of the Elevens and then leaned back on the leather seat. She looked out of the window, feeling nervous, yet excited. Excited to see Mike, to talk to him, to-

To what? What was she going to do?

After a while, Jane started to recognize the streets and she knew she was getting close to her theatre building. Its inauguration had been one of the happiest days of her life. There had been such a huge crowd to see her and Max open it up for the first time. The first exhibition had been of a young painter who wasn’t very well known. Thanks to her stepfather and some of his rich friends, the young painter sold all his paintings that day, giving him enough money to purchase his own studio.

Finally, the taxi came to a stop and the driver turned to her with a soft smile.

“We’re here, miss,” he said.

She looked at the building that belonged to her, starting from its top and moving down to its tall, arched windows and finally to its big name carved into a billboard of dark wood.

The Theatre of the Elevens.

At some point of her life, Jane would have to start admitting some things to herself that she had tried to deny for the past few years. Like how her favourite necklace had been a gift from Mike and that was why she never took it off (her fiancé had once tried to give her a necklace, and she told him straight to his face that she would never wear any other necklace besides that one. She also didn’t explain the reason why and he never asked.); like how every time she heard the name Mike, her heart skipped a beat and she was thrown back into her childhood years; like every time she looked at the watch and saw it was 11:11, she felt like crying; like how she had named her theatre building because of Mike’s nickname to her.

“Miss?”

Jane blinked, waking up from her thoughts.

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled and turned to her purse. She paid the nice taxi driver. “Thank you.”

“Thank *you*, miss.”

Jane forced a polite smile on her lips before opening the taxi’s door and getting out. She watched it drive away, going left in the following turn.

Finally, she started walking to the building in front of her. She grabbed the keys from inside her purse (she always carried all the keys from the theatre with her), and opened the small, wooden door next to the big entrance which was locked down with a grate.

It was dark inside. Her guests were staying in the fourth floor and there were other paths for them to use without having to come to the main hall.

She went through a secret passage behind the ticket office and climbed a staircase to the fourth floor. There was a small hall before going into the guest room's hallway. Mike was standing there, hands in his sweatshirt's pockets and a foot tapping nervously on the floor. When he saw her, he stood up straight and walked up to her.

Jane forced a small smile before motioning with her head to the stairs that lead to the fifth floor.

"Come."

The fifth floor was the oldest part of the building. Max liked to call it the attic. There was a red door which only Jane had the keys for (Max never wanted a set since she said that floor gave her the creeps). She opened it to reveal a wide room with old leftovers from previous plays. There were mannequins, mirrors, old chairs from the spectators' seats, one or two wardrobes and a red-stained mattress that had been used a long time ago for a play involving a character that killed herself in the last act.

There was also a big, oval window filled with dust since nor she nor Max remembered to ask the cleaning ladies to come upstairs to clean it. Jane approached it slowly and rubbed a hand on the glass, scrubbing the dust away. She heard Mike getting closer as well, almost standing next to her, but still giving her some space.

Neither talked for a while, Jane staring down at the empty street, Mike gazing at her, waiting for her to say something.

"I feel like a kid," Jane finally talked, with a tiny smile on her lips. "Sneaking out to see you."

Mike's lips curled into a small smile too.

"It didn't use to feel wrong, though."

Jane felt tears burning her eyes.

"Does it feel wrong now?"

Mike didn't say anything at first.

“Well, not to me...” He finally confessed.

Jane finally turned to him. She let her purse fall to the floor and Mike followed its movements with his eyes. Then, he looked at her again, curious. He watched as she took the final steps between them and came to a stop as their bodies almost touched.

“You owed me,” she murmured as if it was a deep secret shared between two kids.

Mike blinked.

“I owed you what?” He asked, confused.

Jane raised a hand and touched his forearm. She gripped it, feeling his warmth. A shadow of a smile appeared on her lips as her eyes turned up to look at him. She took one small step forwards and her torso touched his.

“You were going to be my first,” she said. “If I had stayed in Hawkins.”

Mike’s mouth opened, but he said nothing.

“You owed me a first time, Mike,” Jane replied.

Like she owed him a first time.

Mike stared at her wide-eyed, his heart beating fast and loud in his ears. Jane stayed put, waiting for him to do something now; to say something.

“But tomo-“ A finger touched his lips, forbidding him from speaking.

“Tonight,” Jane said.

They had tonight.

Mike could have stayed there, not moving while considering what she was asking for and wondering all he wanted, but he knew that, in the end, he would end up doing what he was doing now: leaning in and kissing Jane. No, not Jane. Eleven. His Eleven.

It wasn't like old times, when they used to steal kisses from each other and then blush. No, these were two grown people who knew what they wanted and what they were doing.

Slowly, Eleven grabbed Mike's wrists and started pulling him to the old, tainted mattress on the attic's floor. He let himself be pulled, let her guide him to wherever she wanted to go because, honestly, Mike would do anything for her.

They laid down together, kissing each other, undressing.

There was no tomorrow.

Present Time

Gus came home to find Jane drinking a cup of tea in the kitchen. He kissed her forehead and asked for their son. Jane hid the tears and said he was sleeping upstairs. She had fed and changed him a while ago. Gus went to check on him.

On the kitchen's table, Jane's phone was taunting her. Mike had sent a message, asking if he could see the baby. Nothing too suspicious. Gus thought of Mike as a good friend of his wife, nothing more. Gus knew Mike had helped Jane out during the pregnancy and had thanked the man himself for doing so. Her husband was so naively sweet, believing with no suspicion that Mike had never had second intentions all those months.

Gus was good and Jane felt a mix of pain, for hiding something so important from him, and anger, for not being brave enough to come clean with all that had happened during the last two years.

God, she was a cheater. She was a bad wife even before she had been a wife. Yet, Gus never doubted her. Mike never stopped loving her. And now the baby... The baby...

"He looks so cute sleeping," Gus said as he walked in the kitchen. He had a proud smile on his face. He sat down next to her and put an arm around her shoulders, pulling her to a soft kiss. But Jane refused. He frowned. "Are you okay?"

"I just had a baby, Gus," Jane replied. "I'm tired." Tired was a euphemism. She felt so exhausted she was sure that if she fell asleep, she would probably get into a coma.

Gus' frown deepened.

"Is there anything I can do?"

"Not make me cook for the next months?"

"Deal."

Jane shook her head with a tiny smile on her lips.

"That's ridiculous."

"What? I can cook."

"You're terrible at cooking," Jane replied, laying a hand on his knee. "You've burned down pasta. No one does that."

Gus pretended to be offended.

"I'm sorry, anyone can do that!"

Jane chuckled tiredly.

"I don't think so... How was the meeting?"

Gus sighed and finally started undoing his tie.

"Tiring as hell," he complained. "Your stepfather is always staring at me. It's so... awkward and makes me ten times more nervous than I have to be!" He sighed, defeated.

Jane caressed his knee understandingly.

"Yeah, he's like that."

Martin Brenner had to control everything and everyone around him. Nothing and no one could be imperfect, could go outside his flawless life plan, or he would have to do something to fix it.

The first time Jane was an unfitting daughter Martin prohibited her from going outside their house for an entire summer. She had done something childish as the child she had been: she broke an old vase during one of Martin's important business parties. It had been a total embarrassment for him that his acclaimed perfect stepdaughter had done something as bad as distracted herself and letting a vase fall to the floor, breaking it into pieces and wetting the floor with the water it had had inside. The flowers, which she remembered being roses, laid on the floor sad and dead. She had cried a lot that night, making the situation even worse. That had happened at the beginning of the summer in which she met Mike for the first time.

"And in two hours I need to go golf with some guys because Martin asked me to," Gus complained, laying his tie on the table. "He can't go because he wants to take your mother somewhere, so I have to go and- "Gus laid his head on her shoulder –"I was a father yesterday, to his grandson, and he doesn't even give me a break."

Jane felt sorry for her husband. But that was a feeling she was used to feel when it came to him.

"Maybe tomorrow your schedule will be better," she tried to make him feel better.

Gus raised his head from her shoulder and sighed.

"You're so bad at this sympathetic shit, Jane, honestly." He leaned over and kissed her cheek. "I'm going to take a shower."

After he left the kitchen, Jane was suddenly filled with a wish to see Mike. Finally, she answered his text and said, sure, he could swing by in two hours.

Jane stood up slowly and took her mug to the sink. She let it there and left the kitchen. She peeked at the living-room, making sure she had indeed turned off the TV before she went to drink her cup of tea (she was so tired she wasn't sure what she had or not done already), and then climbed the stairs. She went to her baby's bedroom. After checking on Dylan, who was still sleeping peacefully, she sat down on the armchair next to his crib. She closed her eyes and instantly fell asleep.

If she dreamt (because people said you dreamt every time you slept), she didn't remember. All she knew was that she suddenly felt shaken and her eyes shot up.

"Sorry," Gus apologized with a small smile, crouching in front of her. "I have to go."

Jane blinked, confused.

"What time is it?"

"Ah..." He looked at his watch on his left wrist. "16h16."

Jane's heart skipped a beat. Repeated numbers.

"Okay."

Gus stood up and leaned down to kiss her forehead.

"Go back to sleep. I just had to tell you I was leaving. I'll be back around dinner time, okay?"

"Okay," she repeated, her eyes half-closed.

She heard Gus leaving the room, his steps fading away until he reached the staircase. Soon, the house's main door closed with a soft bang. Jane opened her eyes, looked down at her lap and searched for her phone. She found it on the floor, behind her feet, almost under the armchair.

There was a text message from Mike, saying he was on his way. Checking the time, Jane assumed he would be here in five or ten minutes.

She stood up carefully and leaned over the crib to check on her infant son.

"Oh, hello there," she said with a tiny smile.

Dylan was looking at her with his brown little eyes. He was so tiny. She leaned in a bit, stretching her arms, and grabbed him carefully, pulling him to her chest.

“Do you need to change?”

The baby just stared at her.

She laid him down on the baby changing table and opened his tiny, blue bodysuit.

Jane had practised how to change a baby's diaper a lot throughout the pregnancy. Gus tried to keep up with her, but he had always been so busy with work. Martin really made him work ten times more than any other employee.

“I’m going to be amazing at changing diapers.”

Jane closed her eyes. If only it had been Gus saying that. But no, Mike had been the one there for her; practising how to change diapers; how to dress babies; how to check a bottle of milk's temperature... Everything.

After changing Dylan's diaper, Jane picked him up and swayed him for a bit until his tiny eyes closed and he fell asleep again. She laid him down in the crib again and left the bedroom with the door half-opened.

She had just taken the last step on the staircase when the doorbell rang. As a habit, she checked herself in the hall's mirror before opening the door. She looked tired and her wavy brown hair was tied in a bad ponytail. She was wearing an old sweatshirt from Gus and a pair of old leggings.

She opened the door. The first thing she noticed about Mike was that he looked like shit too. He had huge dark circles under his eyes, he was paler than usual and his hair was a mess. He wasn't also wearing his best clothes. Actually, he almost looked like he had just rolled out of bed.

“I didn't sleep last night,” he said. “I was... I was in front of the hospital, I thought- Well, you know, visiting, but I-“

“Mike.”

He went quiet and looked at her with worried eyes. She opened the

door wider and let him come in.

“He’s sleeping,” she told him as she closed the door.

“I still want to see him,” Mike said. “And you.”

Jane smiled weakly. Mike approached her and touched her cheek, caressing it gently. She looked up at him.

“How are you?”

“So tired,” she murmured.

Mike wrapped his arms around her and pulled her to a tight hug. She let herself fall against his chest, knowing he would hold her up if needed. She sighed in relief.

“Is he... Is...” Mike was scared to say the words. “Is he mine?”

Jane looked at him, her chin resting on his chest. He looked scared, she noticed.

“Come and see.”

Jane grabbed his hand and pulled him up the stairs. They moved carefully through the hallway and stopped by the baby’s bedroom’s door. Mike stared at the door and at the painted tiger on it and smiled softly.

“It’s beautiful,” Mike said.

“Will’s an artist.”

Jane opened the door wide enough that it touched the wall inside the bedroom. She gave Mike’s hand a squeeze and he looked nervously at her.

“Are you scared?”

“Not the kind you think I am,” he muttered.

Jane let him walk in first, letting go of his hand, and leaned against the doorway. She watched as he walked slowly to the crib, his eyes

wandering just for a second around the bedroom. He stopped by the crib and looked inside.

She saw how a slow realization came to his eyes as he raised his head to look at her.

“His hair...”

Jane nodded.

“Yeah.”

Mike blinked, hiding tears behind his tired eyes, and looked at the baby again. His baby. He put a hand inside the crib and gently touched his son’s head.

“He’s beautiful.”

Notes for the Chapter:

I hope you enjoyed it. Kudos & Comments are more than welcome since they give me energy to write (really, they do!).

5. Chapter 5

July 2004

“What is that on your wrist?”

Jane raised her eyes from the soup she had been eating in a pouting quiet. It had beans in it. She hated beans. Her stepfather was staring at her with a weird look, his eyes staring down at the bracelet she had bought in Hawkins’ fair last week.

“A bracelet,” she answered.

Martin frowned.

“Where did you get it?”

“I found it somewhere in my jewellery box.”

Martin didn’t seem pleased with her answer. He looked rather suspicious, his eyes moving from the bracelet to Terry.

“When did she get that bracelet?”

Terry shrugged.

“I don’t know. We must have bought it a few years ago,” his wife replied, taking a full spoon of soup to her mouth. They usually got Jane souvenirs and presents every time they went on a trip. As you could image, Jane had many souvenirs and presents kept in her bedroom somewhere. She didn’t even know when she had got most of them.

Seeing how his wife wasn’t suspicious of the bracelet, Martin let himself relax and believe in her words. Terry would know. She always did.

“So, why did you decide to wear it?” Martin asked his stepdaughter.

Jane shrugged, stirring her soup with the spoon, pushing the beans to the edges’ of the plate.

"I was rearranging the things in my jewellery box and I found it there," she lied easily. Then, she pretended to be worried and blinked her eyes innocently before saying in a tiny voice, "Why? Does it look bad?"

Martin coughed before shaking his head and putting on a smile.

"No, of course not."

"Nothing ever looks bad on you, sweetie," her mother added with a kind look.

Jane forced a smile at both.

"Thank you," she said, acting out shyly.

Little did they know what she was up to.

That afternoon, she paid off Jerry again so that she could have his keys. The gardener stuttered a bit, worried that he would get caught by his bosses giving away his keys *for the second time* to the young girl. Jane was such a sweet person and Jerry knew he could trust the twelve-year-old. She was wiser and more sensible than most kids her age. But his boss, Mr. Martin Brenner, scared the shit out of him.

"If you don't mind me asking, Miss Jane," Jerry said tentatively after giving her his keys, "can I ask you where you are going tonight? I mean, there's no fair in town anymore..."

Jane's lips curled into a beautiful, happy smile. Jerry found himself smiling back at the girl.

"I have a date, Mr. Jerry," she confessed. Her cheeks turned a bit red before she added, "It's with a boy that I really like."

Jerry chuckled softly.

"The friend you go see so many times?" He wondered.

Jane bit her bottom lip, controlling her happy smile, and nodded.

"Yes. We're going to have burgers and then go to a park; I don't know

which one, but he says it's really nice out there at night. You can see the stars clearly, he told me."

Jerry, who was a born-and-raised citizen of Hawkins, tried to hide his amused laugh as he understood what Jane's date was going to try and do. If he was thinking correctly, the park the boy was probably taking Jane was the one by the city's borderline. It was a very famous park among young couples who went there looking for some privacy and romantic getaways. During summer, if you found the right spot in the high areas, you could look up and see a beautiful sea of shining stars sparkling the dark sky up. It was a really nice view. Especially if you were trying to conquer a girl's heart.

"I hope you have fun tonight, Miss Jane," Jerry ended up saying.

Jane giggled.

"Thank you, Mr. Jerry. I'm sure I will."

The rest of Jane's afternoon was spent with her mother. They went out for a walk in the property, passing by a forest of beautiful, well-treated flowers. There were roses, tulips, daisies, orchids... Jane loved to see the colourful garden, never once taking a flower from its place. She liked them better in the ground, where they belonged and grew, than half-dead in her hand or in vases inside the house.

"Are you enjoying your vacations, Jane?" Terry Brenner suddenly asked as they gazed at the flowers.

Jane looked at her mother, surprised with the question.

"Of course, mom. Why do you ask?"

With a tiny smile, Terry approached her daughter and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. They started walking again.

"I just... I understand you, sweetie. I know that... staying in here all day, for an entire summer, it... it gets boring. But you know you can go outside, right?"

Jane forced a smile, but it ended up being a sad one.

"But I don't have any friends here, mom," she replied. It was a lie, of course. She had Mike and, maybe, Lucas, Dustin and Will. But she couldn't introduce them to her stepfather. If they were girls, there would be no trouble in introducing them to the family, but boys... Jane was twelve. She was certain Martin wouldn't allow his acclaimed perfect stepdaughter to only have boys as friends.

Terry sighed and rubbed her daughter's upper arm sympathetically.

"I'm sorry for that, sweetie."

Jane tried to keep up her forced smile.

"It's okay, mom."

Martin came home around dinner time. They ate almost in silent, except for the few times her stepfather asked something to her mother and vice-versa. Jane was simply ignored by the two grown-ups as she ate her rice with peas and a steak. She was going to leave most of it on the plate, of course, since she had a burger at Benny's waiting for her. She also kept an eye on the two adults, making sure they didn't notice she wasn't eating as much as usual. Luckily, they didn't. And they didn't even ask her anything, or made small chat with her. It wasn't like Jane had much to say about anything. Whatever Martin and her mother liked, she didn't. And all her days were the same, so there was no news to share over dinner time. In case, you know, if Jane actually wanted to share something with her stepfather.

Around nine pm, Jane said good night. This time, instead of going to her bedroom and wait for a while, she sneaked directly through the corridor that lead to the big glassed-doors and then to the garden. She had hidden her jacket inside a weird-looking vase that had ugly, red-painted strips over it.

Her escape was done quickly and soundlessly. Soon, she was by the wire fence where she and Mike usually met.

Eleven smiled seeing Mike already there, checking his wrist watch. He had his bike leaning against one of the trees. She walked slowly to him and, noticing he hadn't heard her yet, she decided to surprise

him by jumping the last steps and grabbing his arm. Mike let out a small scream and jumped, scared.

Eleven giggled.

“El, jeez,” Mike muttered and sighed. “Don’t sneak up on people like that, honestly.” He raised a hand to his heart.

She touched the hand he had placed over his chest and sent him a sweet, innocent smile. Mike just stared at her, suddenly enchanted. To make it even worse, Eleven leaned in and kissed his cheek.

Mike blushed and coughed.

“L-let’s go?”

Eleven nodded.

“Let’s go.”

They arrived thirty minutes late to Benny’s diner. The owner himself served them two cheeseburgers, a big basket of French fries and two milkshakes.

Mike talked about his day. He woke up almost at lunch time with his mother shouting at him, and then with his older sister coming into his bedroom and pulling the sheets from him. It had been a very unpleasant thing to experience, but he said it with a smile since Eleven giggled at the story. Then, he talked about how he had gone to the arcade with Lucas, Dustin and Will. He made teasing comments over the fact that Dustin kept losing games and blamed the other boys from distracting him. He might have been a bit right. They all got too excited when playing games.

On her hand, Eleven didn’t say much. She told him how she talked to Jerry, gave him some money in exchange for his keys, and then spent the afternoon with her mother in the garden. There wasn’t much to do in Brenner’s property when you’ve basically seen it all. Too many summers have already gone by since she was first grounded. The place was big, but Eleven had had too much free time on her shoulders.

“Why can’t you still come out?” Mike asked almost at the end of the meal.

Eleven shrugged, grabbing the last French fry from the basket.

“I only know you, Dustin, Lucas and Will... My stepfather wouldn’t approve if I only had boys as friends,” she explained. “Anyways, it has become easy to just...get away.”

Mike made a face, understanding, before taking out his small wallet from his short’s back pocket.

Eleven looked at what he was doing and saw him taking out more money than he needed for his part of the meal.

“Mike, you-“

“This time, I’ll play,” Mike said with a smile. “Next time, you do it. Okay?”

Eleven smiled, agreeing.

After paying Benny for the meals, and the man giving them two lollipops on the house, they walked up to Mike’s bike, which he had left on the bike stands by the parking lot. Mike took it out of its spot and then jumped in. Eleven took her seat behind him, wrapping her arms around his waist.

They rode for a while, enjoying the breeze of fresh air hitting their faces, making their hair go a bit messy. Neither spoke to each other, Mike focusing on riding the bike and Eleven enjoying the view of Hawkins at night. She even laid her head against his back and smiled contently.

Maybe they could do this forever.

“Mike?” She suddenly said.

“Yes, El?”

“Did I ever get to tell you about that song? The one I didn’t know the name and the singer?”

Mike looked quickly behind his shoulder. He shook his head.

“I don’t think so. Did you get it?”

“Yes. It’s by Alicia Keys. It’s called *If I ain’t go you.*”

Mike smiled softly.

“I don’t think I know it.”

“I can sing it to you.”

Before Mike could reply, El started humming softly the song. Then, she started singing the chorus, waving her head softly to the sides. Mike’s smile never left his face.

“But everything means nothing, if I ain’t go youu, yeeah.”

Mike stopped his bike suddenly. Jane stopped singing. He motioned with his chin to the entrance of the park, a big, wooden gate whose doors were wide-opened. On top, it had its name craved in the wood. Angel’s Park.

“Why is it Angel’s Park?”

“It has a statue of an angel. I guess that’s why,” Mike answered. He looked at her over his shoulder. “By the way, you’ve got a really amazing voice, El.”

Eleven’s grip on his waist tightened as she lowered her eyes shyly and muttered a thank-you.

They got off the bike and Mike pushed it all the way inside the park. They made small chat as they walked around the paths that had been built so that people didn’t step on the beautiful decorated gardens. At a certain point, Mike moved his direction to the grass and the two of them climbed a short hill until they reached its top.

“This is it,” Mike muttered as he laid his bike on the grass. He felt his hands sweaty, and not just because he had to push the bike’s weight with him for a while. He moved slowly to the wooden bench on top of the hill. Eleven followed him quietly, her head tilted back and her

eyes gazing at the stars.

It was beautiful there. If they looked up, there was a beautiful starry sky shining at them. If they looked down, they could see almost all the beautiful, gigantic park that went on and went, full of lovely flowers and trees. The wooden gates seemed tiny from where they stood.

“This is beautiful,” Eleven muttered, her eyes turning to Mike. She smiled. “Thank you.”

Mike’s lips pressed together into an awkward smile. He rubbed his hands against his jeans nervously as he watched her look up again to the sky. He had brought her here for a reason. He had to do it now.

She looks so pretty tonight, he thought. Eleven always looked pretty to him, but tonight... there was something different tonight.

“E-el?”

Eleven looked at him.

“Yes?”

Mike licked his lips and closed his sweaty hands into two nervous fists.

“I... I...” He gulped. He couldn’t be like this, so awkward and weird, when he was trying to confess something so important to Eleven. What good would she think of him if he couldn’t even speak coherently a sentence?

Suddenly, a hand touched his. He looked at Eleven. She smiled softly.

“What is it, Mike?”

He blinked, looking down at her lips curled into such a pretty smile.

“You look pretty tonight,” he said.

Eleven blushed slightly. Instead of pulling away, like Mike imagined she would do, she slid closer to him. Her hand never left his.

“You look really nice too,” she replied.

Mike looked for a second, his stomach filled with crazy butterflies.

“I...” He started again. *Come on, Mike, do it.* “I like you, El.”

Eleven’s smile never left her face as she said, “I like you too, Mike.”

Mike closed his eyes. Of course, she did not understand how deep his words were.

“I mean,” he said, turning his body to hers, “I like you... like... like more than friends usually like each other and I-“

“Mike,” Eleven interrupted him. Her pretty smile was still there, on her lips, taunting him. “I understood what you meant.”

Mike blinked a few times.

“R-really?”

She nodded shyly.

“Of course.”

“I...” Mike looked away for a second, pulling himself together. Then, his eyes shifted back to Eleven’s face. Eleven’s lip. “I want-“

Before he could end the sentence, a pair of lips touched his. They were soft.

Eleven pulled back. He stared at her with his mouth open, his heart beating crazily fast. It had never beat this fast.

Eleven suddenly giggled nervous.

“Say something,” she asked.

“I... I like you so much, El.”

His crush showed him her pretty smile again.

“I like you so much too, Mike.”

October 2015

The morning before her wedding Jane Ives woke up in a man's shirt and snuggled against a warm body that did not belong to her fiancé.

After coming to her senses and realizing she was in her theatre building's attic with Mike sleeping next to her, she stood up carefully, changed clothes and left quietly. She texted Mike a message for when he woke up: *I'm sorry I had to go.*

She managed to get to the hotel before Max or any of her friends woke up. She took a long shower, letting the warm water cleansed her soul from any bad thoughts she could have. By bad thoughts, she meant all memories from the night before.

It had been good. Too good. Every time Jane closed her eyes, she saw Mike's face, felt his lips on her, heard his voice murmuring things in her ear; murmuring promises they had left behind in their childhood years.

And then, they fell asleep facing each other, their hands gently touching one another between their bodies.

Jane sat down on the hotel bed, wrapped in a warm bathrobe, and rubbing her wet, wavy hair with a towel. She looked over at all her clothes, which were scattered around on the floor, making a trail to the bathroom's door. She dropped the towel on the floor as well, before looking over at the time in the alarm o'clock.

11:11.

Jane fought an urge to laugh at the irony as tears gathered together in her eyes. She looked away from the time and took a deep breath.

Suddenly, there was a knock on the door. Jane didn't even move from where she was sitting. She knew it was Max, and her friend would let herself in in just a few seconds.

"Well, hello, hello, you-" Max stopped still, a hand on the door she had just closed. She frowned, taking a good look at her best friend -

“You’re not okay.”

Jane forced a tiny, tired smile.

Max approached her fast and knelt in front of her. She grabbed Jane’s hands.

“What’s the matter?”

Jane felt like crying again. She took her hands away from Max and dropped her head on them, hiding her face.

“Jane,” Max sighed and moved to sit next to her. She wrapped an arm around her friend’s shoulders. “Talk to me.”

There was a moment of silence in the hotel room that was only interrupted by Jane sniffing and then saying, “I can’t get married.”

Max blinked.

“W-why not?”

Jane shook her head and remained quiet.

“Jane, please,” Max asked. She stretched her right hand and touched Jane’s chin, making her look up at her. “What happened?”

“I... I called Mike last night,” Jane confessed.

Max’s eyes went wide-opened for a second, before the woman pulled herself together. She couldn’t freak out right now. One of them had to keep their mind sane.

“W-what for?”

Jane shrugged, trying to act like it hadn’t been important.

“I don’t know...”

“Did you guys talk?” Max asked, worried.

Jane nodded, her teething digging into her bottom lip nervously.

“What did you guys-“

“Oh, come on, Max!” Jane raised her head, suddenly feeling mad. She looked at her best friend distressed. There were tears wanting to fall and a heavy pain in her chest area. “You know what you want to ask.”

Max stared at her for a moment.

“Did you meet him?”

“Yes.”

“Did you guys... do something?”

“Yes.”

Max blinked. Jane looked at her with a small wrinkle between her eyes, afraid of what her friend could say about the situation. It was wrong. God, she knew. It had been completely wrong to do what she did with Mike. Even if it had felt right between the two of them, it was wrong because of Gus. Gus didn't deserve it. He had always been an amazing guy and Jane should have thought better.

“You were drunk,” Max suddenly said.

Jane frowned, confused. Max threw her hands up.

“Let's go with that, okay? Lots of people do crazy stuff on their bachelor's party and-“

“No!”

“But-“

“No, Max,” Jane said. “I wasn't drunk, okay? I was completely sober when I met up with him. I... I-“ She gripped her hair in frustration, the dampness of it wetting her hands – “I was the one that took the initiative for everything that happened last night, okay? And it was wrong and... Max, I can't get married. I really can't. And I'm going to call Gus and say that.”

Max's eyes almost popped out of her eyeholes. She shook her head frenetically and grabbed her best friend's hands.

"Jane, you can't. You've dedicated yourself to Gus for four years. You planned this entire wedding basically on your own. It's your special day, Jane!"

Jane finally started crying.

"I can't. I can't face Gus when I had sex with Mike last night!"

"You had sex with him!?" Max interrupted, shocked. "What?! Jane, I—" Max shook her head, trying to focus her thoughts – "Why did you go and sleep with him?"

Jane looked away, feeling suddenly shy and ashamed.

"He owed me a first time."

Max stared at her wide-eyed.

"W-what?"

"He owed me, Max." Jane looked at her friend, scared. "He was supposed to be my first... He was supposed to be everything and then I had to leave Hawkins and..." She couldn't finish the sentence.

"But Jane... That..." Max didn't know what to reply.

It was such a messed-up situation. It made sense now that Jane didn't want to get married. Max wouldn't in her place. Getting into a marriage that was already destroyed... If she did it and then Gus found out, it would hurt much more. It would be a lie and a betrayal together. A long-hidden lie...

But, on the other hand, even Max knew that Jane couldn't just come out and cancel her wedding at the last minute. There was someone who would never forgive her for that; who would ruin her life and Gus'.

"Your stepfather will destroy you," Max suddenly said.

Jane closed her eyes and cried harder, letting out sobs of pain.

His perfect family wouldn't be perfect anymore if Jane cancelled the wedding. If Jane admitted having cheated on her fiancé. How terrible would that look to Brenner's business friends? His acclaimed perfect stepdaughter, a cheater, a slut? Oh yes, she would be everything bad there was to be because, if she was one thing, then she could be many. At least, in her stepfather's eyes, she could. If she could cheat, she could sleep with any guy that showed up in front of her. If she could sleep with any guy, she could go out too much, drink too much, get into stuff that she shouldn't. If she did all that, she would be a disgrace to the family.

"I can't... I can't back down, can I?" Jane asked, despite knowing the answer. "I have to... Oh God."

Max hugged her, a hand stroking her back gently.

"Just pretend it never happened, Jane... You can do it. You can erase one night from your memory. It was just one night, that was it. It doesn't matter. Now –" Max turned Jane's face to her – "Now, what matters is Gus and your future together. Right?"

Jane stared at her with silent tears falling down her face.

A future together with Gus.

He kissed her neck softly, his lips almost not even touching her skin, and she shivered in pleasure. Her hand, the one she had on his messy, dark hair, pulled him closer and their lips met again. He smiled against her mouth and whispered, "I missed you every day."

She couldn't do it.

"You have to do it, Jane," Max said almost as if she read her mind. "You have to think about Gus."

Gus. Sweet Gus who had been the perfect man for the past four years. He did not deserve any of this. But he did not deserve having his life ruined either.

Jane finally nodded.

“Okay... Okay, I’ll... I’ll get married.”

Present Time

“Is he coming back soon?” Mike asked after Eleven hung up the phone. Her husband had called a few moments ago, interrupting their conversation.

Eleven shook her head.

“He has to go to dinner with them now...” She sighed and sat down on the armchair’s support. Mike was holding their baby in his arms; little Dylan was staring at his father with curious eyes. “Martin does this to him all the time...”

Mike looked at her with a sad expression.

“I’m sorry.”

Eleven leaned in and laid her head on top of his. She sighed again.

“You can stay for dinner if you want,” she offered. “I’ll need an encouragement to actually eat something.”

Mike frowned.

“You have to eat, El. Don’t forget that.”

Jane raised her head and leaned back on the armchair. She was sitting in an uncomfortable position, but it was worth it just because she could look adoringly at Mike holding their baby.

“I’ll try.”

Mike shook his head and stood up, carefully not to upset little Dylan.

Eleven watched quietly, with adoration in her eyes, as Mike laid their son inside the crib, covered him with a blanket, and then turned to her. He reached out an arm for her to take. She smiled tiredly and

grabbed his hand, intertwining their fingers together. He pulled her up from the armchair's support.

She stepped closer to him, her body crushing softly against his. Mike leaned down and pecked her lips. Eleven sighed happily.

"I'll make you dinner."

She let out a small, tired giggle.

"I can't wait to see what you'll prepare."

Mike lead the way to the kitchen. He pulled a chair for Eleven to sit down and then crossed the room so he could get to the small food storeroom that was situated after the fridge. He was there for a while, and finally came out with a plastic bag of fusilli pasta, two cans of cut mushrooms and a bottle of tomato pulp.

"You're going to prepare me a feast?" Eleven joked.

Mike chuckled, putting down all the ingredients on the counter. He started opening shelves, looking for a pot.

"This is the kind of stuff I used to eat in college with. Dustin, Lucas and Will, so -" He sent her a quick glance, smiling - "yeah, it's a feast."

Eleven giggled softly, placing her elbow on the table and using her hand as a support for her head. She stayed there, admiring Mike moving around her kitchen, as he had done a few times in the past two years, while preparing her a meal. Mike wasn't the greatest cook. Far from it, if she was honest, but he had a few tricks up his sleeve that sometimes would use to surprise her. Showering her with dishes that he usually ate in college with Dustin, Lucas and Will was one of them.

After putting water in the pan to boil it and preparing a pan with cut onions and olive oil, Mike took the few minutes he had to do nothing and sat down next to Eleven. He touched her cheekbone with his finger and smiled at her as she gazed at him with her adorable, brown eyes. She was tired, really tired. He wished he could do more for her.

Eleven suddenly raised herself and moved from her chair to Mike's lap. He wrapped an arm around her waist, keeping her close.

"Martin thought it was weird," she said as she hugged his neck with one of her arms, "that Dylan had black hair."

Mike blinked.

"Was he suspicious of anything?"

Eleven shook her head. Her free hand moved to Mike's chin. She caressed it gently.

"My mom helped me out... She knows now. She knows about us..."

Mike's eyes went wide for a second.

"Did... Is she going to tell him?"

Eleven shook her head again and leaned in so that she could kiss Mike's forehead. She felt his hand tightening the grip on her waist.

"She's going to keep our secret, don't worry."

Mike just moved his head up and down to let her know he heard what she said. He just wasn't sure if he agreed. Two years have gone by since they re-met each other... Almost two have passed since they got involved with each other. They barely fought, always knowing they were just an affair, but there were times in which it got too much for Mike. He wanted Jane for himself. He wanted to be able to love her every second of the day, and not when her husband was at work or she was at the theatre building. He wanted to take her out for walks while holding hands, tell his family about his girlfriend, wake up next to her...

Mike wanted a life with Eleven, that was for sure. And there were times they fought because of it. It always came down to the same result: she couldn't give him what he wanted, what they both wanted, because of her stepfather. Martin Brenner would destroy their lives if Jane stepped out of her role of perfect stepdaughter. Mike had tried to fight that argument as well, tried to argue that they could outlive whatever Brenner did to them, but Jane was too scared.

And, when she got pregnant, despite having the will to say *let's finally be together*, Mike found himself hiding behind the same reasons Jane didn't leave her husband: he used Martin as an excuse to keep the things as they were. He regretted deeply having had that cowardly moment.

"I have to go put the pasta in the pot," Mike stated.

Jane stood up from his lap, letting him go. She glanced at the hall.

"I'm going to check on Dylan."

Mike nodded.

He was alone for only a few minutes, stirring the pasta silently. It almost seemed domestic: he, cooking for Eleven, who had just given birth to their child... But this wasn't his home, this wasn't his kitchen and Eleven wasn't his wife.

Life was a fucked-up thing.

"He's still sleeping," Eleven announced as she returned to the kitchen. She walked up to him and wrapped her arms around his torso, resting her head between his shoulders blade. Mike was tall, taller than Gus, skinner than Gus... For years, she had felt like Gus' embrace was the greatest, as if it was almost perfect to her. But now...now she knew what it was like to hug and cuddle Mike.

When she was younger, a little child still, she believed in soul mates and true love. Jane knew that she became a bit of a romantic because of her childhood beliefs. Having met Mike at the age of ten, having fallen in love with him for five years, increased her belief that there was someone out there for each one of us... But then, then they went their separate ways and Jane Ives decided to live according to more pragmatic views. Even after she started dating Gus, she had a bit of uneasy opinions about love.

Mike coming back to her life, thought, changed everything again.

"Mike?" She called, tiptoeing so that she could reach his shoulder.

He looked over his shoulder and gave her a tiny smile. "Yes?"

She kissed him over his sweatshirt before saying, "You're my soulmate."

Mike stopped stirring the pasta. The smile on his face was still there, just a small evidence of how happy her words had made him.

"You're my soulmate too, El."

October 2015

"I do," Jane said.

In front of her, Gus was smiling widely, madly happy, as he held her hands tightly. If she glanced at her left, she would see a church bursting with people. All seats were taken, and some of the guests were in the back, having had to stand up throughout the entire ceremony. All of them were showing off sweet smiles, joyful for the couple. Behind Jane, there was Max holding her bouquet of orchids.

Jane's dress was beautiful, sketched exactly for her by one of her stepfather's business friends. It had a sheath silhouette, fitting perfectly her body's curves. The neckline of it was shaped like the top half of a heart, giving her some cleavage, but not too much that would be disrespectful for a church wedding. When she first tried it on, her mother had cried happy tears. Jane had felt like a princess in it, looking at herself in the mirror and just knowing it was the perfect wedding dress for her.

Now, the dress was still perfect. But everything around her just seemed wrong.

Why, but why did she just say yes?

"You can now kiss the bride," the preacher announced.

Jane blinked, surprised, and saw Gus leaning in to kiss her. The entire church started clapping. She felt like throwing up.

Everything from that moment on was a blur. People came and went, greeting her, kissing her cheeks, saying congratulations, but Jane felt

like she was somewhere else and not there. She kept looking for Mike. She had seen him arriving at the church, sitting in the back row, but he had yet come to greet the couple.

Of course, he wouldn't greet them. What was she thinking?

At last, they left the church. The rice parade to the car was terrible and Gus kept trying to protect her. Jane just wanted to cry and get out of there as soon as possible.

"You've rice on her braids," Gus said with a chuckle and tried to clean them up.

Jane had decided to do her hair in two plated braids. Max had straightened her wavy hair and then did her magic as she had spent her childhood and teen years in a hair salon with her mother.

"I'm starving," Gus remarked, unbuttoning his suit's jacket. He looked rather handsome in his black suit. The blue tie had made Jane chuckle when she first saw him. "Aren't you?"

Jane nodded, her hand reaching out to his. She didn't want to speak, but couldn't just shut out her new husband on the first minutes of their marriage. She had to show him she was happy. And a part of her was. Four years of relationship, one year of engagement and months of crazy, nerve-wrecking preparations... This was their day, their special day.

Their wedding reception was going to be held in this very antique, gigantic house which, according to their wedding planner, used to belong to a family of aristocrats in the seventeenth century. The mansion was beautiful. It stood tall in the centre of an ornamented garden. Bushes were cut and arranged into animal figures. The grass was all cut short. Flowers and well-treated trees gave life to the place. The path from the main gate to the mansion was all cemented. There was a small fountain right before the mansion's big staircase.

"You have to get married here, Jane," her mother said with sparkling eyes and a tissue in her hand. "This place is beautiful."

That was why they were here. Jane had given in to her mother's

wishes.

The first part of the wedding reception was taking place outside the mansion, in a beautiful, squarish part of the garden. There were round tables packed with small snacks and tasty entries. Guests started gathering around them, eating and drinking.

Once again, the couple had to walk around to greet mostly the same people they had greeted in the church. Of course, some of them hadn't actually got the chance to greet the new married couple, so they were doing it now. It was quite funny how they all seemed to have some kind of advice for them.

Marriage won't change a thing, you'll see.

Marriage will be fun, you'll see.

Please each other and everything will be okay, you'll see.

Communication is very important, you'll see.

You'll see.

You'll

see.

Jane felt like shouting at all of them. Thankfully, her husband noticed she wasn't okay and took her away from the crowd for a bit. They managed to get into the spacious room where the meals would be taking place later. They surprised a couple of waiters with their arrival. Gus calmed them down, saying they were just taking a break from outside. Then, he turned to Jane.

"What's wrong?"

Jane took a deep breath.

She hadn't seen Mike yet. She wanted to see him. That was what was wrong.

"Too many people saying the same shit over and over."

Gus let out a small chuckle and wrapped an arm around her waist.

“It’ll get better. Let’s eat something, drink... put on a smile because, babe, we just got married!” Gus exclaimed happily.

Jane forced a small smile at him.

“I know. I want to be happy, I do, but... you know crowds sometimes suffocate me.”

And not seeing Mike wasn’t helping her at all.

Stop it, Jane, just stop it.

Gus touched her face softly.

“It’ll get better, okay?” He repeated himself.

Jane sighed and nodded.

They went back outside.

For the entire time they were out there, Jane managed to catch a glimpse of Mike only twice. One time, he was making small chat with some of her young cousins, making them laugh over something, and the second time Max, her best friend and maid of honour, was talking to him. When she saw the two of them chit chatting, she turned around and grabbed a random glass of champagne. She drank it all.

“Dear, you don’t drink it like that,” her mother murmured in her ear.

Jane sighed and put down the glass.

“Too late now,” she muttered and walked away, pulling her dress a bit up so she wouldn’t step on it.

She was almost approaching Mike and Max when two guests, from Gus’ side, interrupted her and started talking to her. Jane bit her bottom lip in order to prevent herself from cursing in front of them. Then, she put a smile on her lips and talked to them.

After a few minutes, she finally got rid of them and got closer to Max

and Mike. When her friend saw her, she blinked and said her name, confused.

“Max, do you mind?” Jane asked nicely.

“But-“

“Please, Max,” Jane begged. She tried not to look at Mike. She tried not to see how handsome he was in his grey suit; how well-brushed his hair was to the left side of his forehead. She tried not to look at his freckles, or his intense dark eyes that were gazing at her.

Max finally caved in and walked away.

“So, she knows,” Mike stated, hiding a hand inside his trousers’ pocket. On the other one, he held a half-drunk champagne glass.

“She always knows everything about me. At least, since we’re fifteen,” Jane replied. She let go of her dress. “And you came.”

Mike looked confused for a second.

“You invited me to.”

Jane stared at him with sad eyes.

Mike took a sip of his champagne, feeling suddenly ashamed and awkward to be there.

Finally, he decided to say, “You look beautiful.”

“You look so beautiful,” he whispered in her ear before kissing it. His lips moved down to her neck, then to her bare torso...

“T-thank you,” Jane managed to say, getting herself out of last night’s memories. “And thank you for coming, Mike. It means-“

“Don’t,” Mike asked gently, shaking his head. He finished his drink and turned to a round table to place it down. He looked at her with sorrow. “Don’t say that. This is tomorrow now, remember?”

He walked away from her.

Jane was frozen for a moment, her mouth hanging open as she felt a terrible, aching pain hit her heart. Someone might have said something to her as they walked by, but she did not react.

This was tomorrow.

Their tonight was gone.

Jane did not move, until she felt tears threatening to expose her. Brusquely, she closed her eyes and tried to take a deep breath. Her beautiful wedding dress felt too tight and she couldn't breathe properly.

Why couldn't she just breathe alright?

"Babe, breathe," he whispered, his eyes lingering for a second on hers and his hand caressing slowly her cheek. "Breathe."

She took a deep breath, closing her eyes. Her bare legs, which were wrapped around his waist, tightened the grip, pulling him closer.

"I'm breathing," she murmured.

He kissed her again.

"Jane?"

Max appeared in front of her. Her friend touched her arms gently, worried.

"Are you okay?"

As she stared at Max, she slowly started hearing the noise and people around them. She was at her own wedding. Gus was there, laughing and joking with his relatives. Her entire family was there... Her friends, his friends...

"I have to be happy," Jane found herself saying.

Despite not understanding where those words came from, Max nodded softly.

“Yes, you do. You’re married now.”

Why did people keep remind her of that?

“I need to get out of this dress,” Jane confessed.

Max snorted.

“Jane, you can’t,” her friend warned her. “You didn’t choose any dress to change to, remember? You said you would wear that one all day.”

Jane had indeed said that.

“I need alcohol then.”

Max laughed.

“Okay, okay. We’ll get to that, but, Jane –“ Max’s expression lost all trace of laughter –“Are you okay?”

She forced a smile upon her lips.

“Yes.”

“Even with... you know.” Max motioned with her head to where Mike supposedly was. Jane didn’t dare to look.

“Yes. Please let’s not talk about that today,” she begged softly.

After eating a few snacks and walking around with another glass of champagne, Jane was finally approached by one of the waiters who announced the dining-room was ready. She called for Gus, and he did all the job of getting people inside. She just stood by the big, high rounded entrance. The glassed-door was gigantic, its frame made of black wood. Jane smiled at every guest that entered until Mike walked in alone. They glanced at each other, before looking away in embarrassment.

What had she been thinking? It was weird and awkward, and-

Why hadn’t he left? Why was he still here?

Because of last night, of course. Had she given him hope? But hadn't she destroyed with it by saying 'I do' to Gus? Was he trying to make her suffer by staying?

Or was he hurting himself?

Luckily, a waiter was passing by with a tray full of champagne glasses and Jane managed to grab one. She drank it all.

"Darling, you're drinking too much," Gus said into her ear after he had approached her. "And the guests are already all inside."

Jane made a face and gave the empty glass to another waitress.

"It's my wedding, Gus. I can drink as much as I want. And eat." She turned to him and grabbed his hand. "Let's eat now, please. I'm starving."

It was a two-course meal, starting out with fish and then moving to meat. For dessert, there were two large tables of cakes, fruit and candies. If Jane remembered correctly, they had also requested ice-cream. The wedding cake stood beautifully in front of the main table, the one where she sat between her husband and her maid of honour. Her mother was right next to Max, and then sat Martin, her stepfather. He glanced at her, giving her a warning look. He had noticed she was acting weird, of course. He always noticed when she wasn't in her best behaviour.

Jane took a first bit of the fish meal and looked around slowly, watching almost every guest she had invited to her wedding. People were eating, talking, laughing. Everyone seemed happy. Her eyes stopped by the small stage situated behind the tables area. It was empty now, but later a DJ would come up. He was probably eating now as well...

Her eyes kept moving from table to table, from face to face... Why were there so many people?

"He's in the Single Friends table," Max murmured in her ear.

Jane almost jumped. She looked at her best friend with a frown. Max's lips curled up into a sad smile.

"I put him in the singles table."

Jane blinked.

"Why?"

"Maybe he could hook up with one of your single friends," Max replied, grabbing her glass of wine and taking a sip.

Jane felt like breaking something. Her grip on the fork and knife tightened as she looked to her right, to the third and most far way table from where she was seated. Mike was sitting between two of her college friends, Mary and Tanya. They were two great women, one was a teacher and the other a reporter. But, right now, Jane felt like kicking them out of the wedding. They were smiling at Mike as he nervously explained something to them.

You can't be jealous, Jane.

Don't be jealous.

Jane.

Martin is looking at you.

Jane realized the last sentence wasn't one of her thoughts. It had been Gus saying that. She looked at her husband, worried. He sent her a sympathetic smile and touched her arm.

"Babe, he's looking at you. Just relax and eat."

Gus hadn't noticed that, inside, Jane had been freaking out over the fact that her first love was sitting just a few meters away from them and was probably flirting with her college friends. Gus had thought she was just simply gazing off at nowhere.

Jane grabbed her glass of wine and drank it all in one gulp. Gus chuckled at her softly.

"Jane--"

"I'm okay," she murmured and forced a smile on her lips. "Don't you

worry now, darling.”

She never called him darling, but it was their wedding day, so Gus didn't give it too much attention. He smiled back at her and turned to his meal.

The meat meal came shortly after, and it was this amazing pork stew with roast potato. However, instead of staying in their places eating, Gus and Jane were giving a sign by Terry Brenner to stand up and walk around. They had to go from table to table and make more small chat with their guests. It was ridiculous how many times they had to do this; how many times they had to hear the same advices; how it was their wedding and they felt like they had been at work for hours now, always trying to please the others instead of doing what they wanted.

Finally, they arrived at the table Mike was sitting. Jane felt like running away because she did not want to face him flirting with other people.

“Hey, how is everything going?” Gus said, pushing Jane closer to him.

“Everything's great, Gus,” Tanya said with a wide smile. Jane felt like punching her.

Stop it, she's your friend.

“And you-“ Gus pointed at Mike. Jane looked scared –“you're Jane's old friend. From Hawkins?”

Mike smiled politely and nodded.

“Yeah, that's right.”

“You're a playwright now, right?”

“And a good one,” Mary intervened.

How the fuck did she know that?

Mike chuckled embarrassed.

“Oh, I suppose.”

Tanya leaned over and touched his arm.

“Don’t be so humble.”

Jane looked at her friend’s hand on Mike and bit her tongue.

What was happening? She was never like this. She wasn’t the jealous type.

“Humbleness is good for business,” Gus remarked.

Mike looked at him for a moment before nodding.

“It is. And... congratulations to you two,” he wished.

Gus smiled widely and looked at his bride. Jane stared at Mike with no expression at all. Inside, she was hurting.

You can’t say that to us, Mike, she thought, you can say that to my husband when last night...

“Let’s go back to the table?” Jane asked suddenly, interrupting Gus’ thanks to Mike. “Please. I really want to try the pork stew.”

“It’s delicious,” Tanya observed, taking a bit of hers.

Jane forced a smile at her, before being taken away from there by Gus.

“You seem a bit edgy,” Gus commented.

“Too crowded,” Jane lied.

The meat meal went, and then came dessert. Jane never once left her seat, unlike her husband who found himself being dragged by his parents to talk to some distant relatives. Jane stayed in her place, drinking her wine and whispering to Max about how some of her step-aunts were looking ridiculous in their dresses.

Finally, a moment that all people had been expected came. The first dance.

Before Gus could ask her for a dance, Jane made him sit down again and asked him to wait a moment.

She walked around the main table and marched up the stage, ignoring everyone's looks. They were wondering what she was up too. She was also.

She climbed up the stage and approached the DJ. She whispered something in his ear and he nodded. He leaned under his DJ table and took out a microphone. He pressed a button before giving it to her. She smiled thankfully and walked up the front of the stage.

"Good afternoon, everyone," she said into the microphone. "I'm really happy that you are all here..." Her eyes laid on Mike, who was now sitting at the closest table from where she stood. She gulped and turned her eyes to the main table. "I want to dedicate a song to someone very special to me."

Everyone cheered, eyes turning to Gus. Jane sighed and gave a thumbs-up to the DJ so that he could put on the song.

She closed her eyes as the song's melody filled in the room. She hummed against the microphone the first notes and finally, began to sing...

Some people live for the fortune

Some people live just for the fame

She didn't have to look to know that Mike was staring at her with wide-opened eyes. She kept the song going, knowing as well that her husband might be wondering why she was singing that song. There had been many afternoons and nights in which Jane hummed to him songs, but this one... he never heard her sing it.

Some people want it all

But I don't want nothing at all

If it ain't you baby

If I ain't got you baby

Jane opened her eyes. She tried to focus on Gus' smile, on Max's dreamy look... How everyone around seemed amazed and touched by the fact she was dedicating a song to her husband.

But it was a song dedicated to someone special.

She never said it was to Gus.

Her eyes turned to Mike.

His eyes were dead serious. His lips pressed together into a thin line. She couldn't read him.

Please know...

No, please don't know.

Jane...

Eleven.

Jane closed her eyes again and kept singing.

Mike had asked her if they would be more than just a first love if she had stayed back in Hawkins eight years ago. Jane had rejected him. The past was in the past. What was done was done. They had different lives. They had different dreams.

Then why was she singing their song?

Please know, Mike... She opened her eyes and looked at him again. Please know that I would have loved you with all my heart if I had stayed in Hawkins.

The song came to an end. Everyone clapped. Gus stood up and went to meet his wife by the stage. He took her into his arms and Jane hid

her face against his shoulder. She tried not to cry. It didn't matter if she did. People would just think they were tears of joy.

But they weren't.

They were tears for Mike Wheeler.

Notes for the Chapter:

I hoped you guys enjoyed this chapter.

I'm not sure when I'll be posting the next chapter since I might be going on vacation, but we'll see.

Please tell me your thoughts on it.

6. Chapter 6

November 2015

“I suppose... this is how life was supposed to go. He’s there and she’s... well, she’s happier.” The tall man in the video looked behind his shoulder. *“And here we are, Lee. Two guys, one car and... I suppose, a road ahead of us. A new adventure.”*

The other man in the video nodded solemnly as he stepped closer to the stage’s edge.

“You’re such a half-full-glass, Luke,” he joked, glancing at his friend.

“Nah, life’s a half-full-glass, Lee. We’re just the water in it.”

The video stopped.

“It’s good,” Gus remarked, laying back on his side of the bed again.

They had been on their honeymoon for thirteen days now. Mike’s play had premiered in her theatre building ten days ago. Almost every night, Max sent her small clips of the play, showing off different scenes. At first, Jane tried to hide it from Gus, excusing herself with a trip to the bathroom, or a walk outside so that she could see the videos alone. But the play was so good, so amazing, that she ended up showing him all the videos.

“I can’t wait to see it live,” Jane said with a small smile.

She couldn’t wait to congratulate Mike on writing what looked like an amazing play. It had everything on it, if all videos Max sent her were right: love, family, friendship, drama, social issues, comedy... All done with a small cast of ten actors. All done with Mike’s imagination.

“Jeez, Jane, we’re on our honeymoon and you can’t wait to go back to your theatre building,” Gus joked with a teasing smile.

Jane rolled her eyes at him before placing her cell phone on the night table. Then, she laid down on the bed and turned her back to Gus.

She had never been one to cuddle before going to sleep. Gus never minded it either since he liked to fall asleep on his stomach.

Jane closed her eyes, but, instead of trying to sleep, her brain began to work over some nagging thoughts; thoughts about Mike and what they had done fifteen days ago...

It's over. It's done. Whatever had happened before the wedding day, it was in the past. Now, when Jane returned, she would still have to see and hang out with Mike for, at least, two more weeks. They could be civilized with each other, right? Just a couple of old friends...

But he left, her voice said in her mind.

Mike had left the wedding without saying goodbye. Jane was sure he hadn't even stayed for the cake. It had broken her heart. She had almost texted him something, but pulled herself together before doing so.

Of course, it hadn't matter that she hadn't texted him anything. After the wedding was over and, while Gus drove them to their hotel room, she grabbed her phone and saw that Mike had sent her a message. It only said: *I understood the memo. Don't worry.*

Jane didn't know which memo he had got. She hoped it had been the right one.

They left Italy three days later, around six am. Gus fell asleep as soon as he sat on his plane seat. Jane remained awake for all the flight. She tried to read a few chapters from a book she had bought in a nice bookshop near the beach they had usually gone for the last two weeks, but her mind kept going back to the videos Max had sent her. Eventually, she grabbed her phone and earpieces. She re-watched all the videos, listening carefully to every dialogue, eyeing every detail of each scene. A hand over her mouth covered her proud smile.

Middle way through re-watching a scene between the couple of the play, Jane lost her smile as her eyes flickered away from her phone's screen to her left hand. The golden wedding band sparkled against the weak light of the sleeping airplane, reminding her of her decisions, of where her life was heading.

Soon, the phone and earpieces were back in her purse and she laid her head back on the comfortable seat. She closed her eyes and tried to find some inner peace.

Of course, Gus had to wake up in that precise moment. He stood up clumsily, apologized for stepping on her right foot and then left to go to the bathroom.

Jane tried to take a deep breath, relaxing herself. In just six hours they would be back home, in Chicago. They would grab a taxi, get home, unpack and then... Then what? Honestly, Jane had no idea what they would do now that they were back from their honeymoon. Gus would probably get back to work since her stepfather was expecting him to do so. Martin Brenner gave Gus everything he wanted, as far as job's fulfilment was concerned, yet he made the man suffer for it. Always working, always stepping in for him, always asking for more... Jane was sure that there were days that her husband felt like quitting. But then he would remind himself that this was his dream job. And, if he quitted while working for Martin Brenner, he would never find another good working spot in his branch of business.

"These bathrooms are so luxurious," Gus commented after he returned to his seat. He showed her a cheeky smile. "Better than my old bathroom. You remember, the one in my flat when we were in college?"

Jane chuckled.

"Gus, any bathroom is better than the one you used to have. That place was awful."

Gus shrugged, taking no offense.

"I wasn't born into richness, babe"

"Neither was I," she remembered him.

Jane had been born to a drug-addicted mother and had had no father. She had lived in flats with no bedrooms, surrounded by unpleasant and untrusty people. When her mind would decide to play

tricks with her and take her back to those days, Jane would always feel grateful for her present life. Grateful for the doctor that had managed to put her mother into rehab. Grateful for her mother's strength and dedication to saving herself and her daughter. Even grateful for Martin Brenner.

Life was such a mess.

"I only have to get back to work in two days," Gus reminded her. "What do you want to do later?"

Jane's lips drew a tiny smile.

"I'd like to go see my old friend's play."

Gus threw his head back and laughed.

"Of course you would. Fine, we can go. I suppose I'll get a free ticket since I'm married to the owner of the theatre building."

Jane rolled her eyes at him.

"Careful, or I'll make you pay double."

Around five pm, they landed at Chicago's airport. After a few check-outs and security checks, they came outside to find a taxi. Gus made all the talk as he helped out the nice taxi driver with the bags. Jane sat inside the car, biting her thumb's nail. She had texted Max, informing her she was back and going home. She also told her she would be dropping by to check the play that night.

Her phone beeped with a message. She looked down and saw Max had replied.

Thank God you're back. I miss you too much. I'm going to have dinner with the crew later. I don't know if you can join us... Gus can come too, of course.

The taxi's back door opened and Jane hid her phone quickly. Her husband sat next to her, flashed her a quick smile before giving their home address to the taxi driver. Jane bit her bottom lip nervously.

"I'm starving," Gus suddenly admitted, rubbing his stomach. He turned to her. "Where do you want to have dinner tonight?"

How ironic of him to ask that.

Jane looked down at her phone before replying, "Actually, Max just texted me saying she is having dinner with the theatre crew tonight. She asked if we wanted to join them."

Gus blinked, surprised with the information. Then, the smile vanished from his face and his eyes lost their joyful enthusiasm.

"Jeez, Jane," he sighed and looked away from her. "You're so obsessed with that."

Jane felt offended.

"Gus, it's my job," she replied.

"And?" Gus looked back at her. "We're just back from our honeymoon. I'm sorry if I want to keep you for myself a bit longer."

Jane frowned, grabbing her phone for some kind of support. She would not fight with him in front of the taxi driver. So, she turned her head away from her husband and gazed at the streets. It was raining in Chicago, not that kind of heavy rain that makes you want to stay at home all day, but the light one, the one you almost don't feel hitting your head and clothes, until you're practically wet.

They arrived home and both grabbed their suitcases. Of course, Gus tried to take Jane's, but she refused and grabbed hers, marching up to their house.

Gus shared a look with the taxi driver and sighed before following his wife to the house.

They were both very stubborn people, Gus having always been the kind of guy that never felt the need to apologize for his actions since he was always in his best behaviour, and Jane being a persistent spirit by nature. At this point of their relationship, they both knew that most likely they were both wrong in the fight. Or hypothetical fight. It hadn't been a fight for real. At least, no yet.

Jane just wanted to unpack, make sure everything was okay in the house (that is, check her plants), and then prepare herself to go to dinner.

She heard Gus entering the room as well. Her husband didn't say anything as he placed his suitcase on the other side of the bed and started unpacking too.

Their eyes met occasionally, but neither spoke.

Really? They got back from their honeymoon and started their married life with a fight? That was how they were going to play it?

Jane fetched from her wardrobe a fancy dark blue dress that had small grey buttons from its neckline to the waist and a pair of black tights. After choosing her underwear, she made her way to the bathroom, ignoring the stare of her husband, who had quite understood what her plans for the evening were.

She was halfway through washing her hair when the bathroom door opened. Then, it closed and steps followed. A shadow appeared behind the foggy glasses of the shower.

"I'll go to the dinner with you," Gus stated.

Jane tried to keep a smile from her lips.

"And you won't be grumpy?" She asked.

She heard Gus chuckling softly.

"I swear I won't."

"Good. We'll leave in an hour."

Gus was a good man.

And Mike?

Jane closed her eyes, the warm drops of water hammering her face. Why did she do that to herself? She hadn't... She hadn't given Mike much thought before he walked in her office more than a month ago.

Of course, throughout the years, she had remembered him dearly, with sorrow sometimes, with nostalgia in others, but kept those memories secure, soft... Now, they were suffocating her, demanding to be revisited, demanding to be...upgraded.

You're a married woman. You made your choice. You got live with it.

The moment Jane and Gus walked in the theatre building's main hall, where everyone was waiting for them before dinner, Max jumped on her and hugged her so tightly that Gus joked, "Jeez, you're going to break my wife, Max."

Most of the theatre crew laughed at him, but not Mike. Jane's eyes met his serious facial expression as he hung in the back, next to Lucas and Will. The other two men surely knew about what had happened the night before her wedding. Mike never kept anything from them as she never kept anything from Max.

"Oh, you're so tan!" Max remarked, looking at her skin. Then, she touched Jane's hair. "And it's so curly!"

Jane rolled her eyes.

"It has always been like this."

"I know. I just missed you."

"Jeez, Max," Gus intervened. "What are you, her wife?"

"Yes," Max replied seriously. Then, she turned to the crew. "Everybody's here? Yes? Good, let's go. We'll all need a feast before tonight's performance."

Most crew passed by the couple and congratulated them. Lucas and Will nodded at Jane in recognition and shook Gus' hands without introducing themselves. Mike forced a smile upon seeing Jane's husband, but ignored her. How ironic of him, to advert his eyes from her, but try and be polite to Gus.

They went to a small restaurant a few streets away from the theatre building, one that she had yet gone with Max. Why hadn't they gone there?

As if she had read her mind, Max said in her ear, “This is that place that was being rebuilt for ages, remember? It finally opened last week!”

“Oh!” Jane let out, remembering the building that had been fenced by a wooden wall and whose top windows had big blue plastics covering them for almost a year. “It finally opened!”

Max laughed excited.

“Yeah, we thought it would never re-opened, but it did, and oh my, Jane —“ Max sighed middle-way through her sentence as she sat down on a table booked for them — “It has divine dishes of fish.”

Jane made a disgusted face.

“Oh God, Max, sometimes I forget about your obsession with fish,” she retorted, moving her empty glass of wine so it was centred with the plate.

“Oh, we’ve learnt all about it these past two weeks,” Lucas intervened. He had sat down in front of Jane. Next to him, and face to face with Gus, it was Mike. Why was Mike sitting in front of her husband?! “She eats tons of fish.”

“It’s healthy!” Max exclaimed.

“I agree with you, Max!” One of the actresses said from the other side of the table.

“Thank YOU!”

Jane glanced at her husband and found him eyeing everyone with a weird kind of smile on his face. She wondered what was going through his mind, facing a bunch of theatre people. Gus was more a businessmen person. Show him a man in a suit and he could do magic with him. But this? Artistic people had something in them that made them stand out in a crowd: they were the weirdos, the outsiders, the misunderstood. Sometimes what they said had double meaning and it wasn’t because they were trying to fool you, but because it was their way of speaking. Their thoughts were their words. They were all messy, and loud and amusing.

Halfway through the meal, Lucas excused himself and dragged Mike out with him.

Jane frowned, confused, and watched as they left the restaurant.

“Lucas smokes,” Will explained.

Jane turned her head to him.

Will flashed her a kind smile before adding, “He likes company when he smokes.”

“My friend, Carl, from work is the same,” Gus added, making small chat. “He always has to have his cigarette break.”

Will acknowledged the man words with a soft chuckle.

Dinner was awkward. More awkward than Jane had expected. She kept looking at Mike, whenever her husband whispered something in her ear. Mike usually didn’t look back, focusing on his plate of pasta or on his crew mates.

It hurt.

Why did it hurt?

“You’re my best friend, Mike,” an eleven-year-old Jane said.

The dark-haired boy smiled, a redness colouring his cheekbones. How adorable he looked, with his red cheeks and his mouth muttering a shy reply. He didn’t look at her at first, too timid with the all situation, but then he did, and she smiled at him.

He had meant too much to her.

Max and Jane took care of the ticket office as the crew prepared themselves backstage. Her husband, who sweetly volunteered to escort some of the VIP clients, had just departed from the main hall with a group of old ladies who, according to Max, were coming to watch the show for the third time.

Jane was confirming some booked tickets for a family of five when

Max called out for her with a worried tone of voice.

She looked from behind the desk and her eyes met her mother's happy smile and Brenner's serious facial expression. She blinked.

What were they doing here?

"Gus invited us over," Terry stated after her daughter switched places with Max, who was now attending the family of five. "He thought it would be nice to come and see this play... hum –" Her mother looked at the tall, large play's poster standing on the wooden rack by the counter – "*The Forgotten Boys*, that you've betted on."

Jane forced a smile.

"That's lovely, Mom. You guys can go take your reserved seats. You know that they are always available for you two."

As her mother and stepfather walked away and climbed the big mahogany stairs that led them to the best seats up in the VIP area, Jane started to feel nervous. Her hands trembled a bit and her smile was painfully fake on her lips as she greeted another two clients.

What if they don't like the play?

The thought brusquely consumed her mind and Jane froze, as the clients waited for their tickets.

Was she feeling nervous because of Mike?

Truth was, her mother and stepfather never got to meet Mike. They never got to see who her first friend, her first crush and her first love had been... Now, they would meet him through his words, through his play. And she wanted them to like him, even if it wasn't for today, since she had a wedding ring on her finger and it didn't belong to Mike, but rather for the old days; the days she had wanted to introduce him to her mother...

"Jane?"

Jane blinked and shook her head, zooming out of her thoughts. She noticed Max was giving her a weird look as the two clients frowned

deeply.

Oh God.

Jane forced a smile and gave them the tickets before saying “Enjoy the show.”

Soon, they closed the theatre doors and went inside to watch the play themselves. Usually, they both went backstage and watched it from there, alongside the crew who wasn’t on stage, but tonight Jane had her husband, her mother and stepfather in the public, and so she made her way to where they were.

She sat down between Gus and her mother as the lights were turned down and a single spot of it illuminated two guys on the stage, in front of the red curtain.

“Well, here we are, Lee, another city,” the tallest actor spoke.

“Indeed, my friend,” the other actor walked to one of the edges of the stage and sat down. He leaned back and rested his hands on the wooden floor behind him. “What do you think we should do?”

“Tell our story, of course. Like we always do.”

The first scene was between the main character, Luke, and his love, a girl named Joana. They had a huge fight about their future. She let herself cry freely as he drunk in his tears. They were too different from one another.

Then, it moved on to a scene in a diner and the two friends, Luke and Lee, were meeting up a girl called Caroline. She was going to join them in their new adventure, but there was something she was clearly hiding.

“I promise you, Caroline, you won’t regret this decision,” The character, Lee, replied with a smirk.

His mate elbowed him and made him look to the other side of the stage, where a new character showed up.

“Who is it?” Caroline asked, turning around on her seat.

“An old friend,” Luke said. Lee was mesmerized by the female figure. “Old faces can hurt more than thousands of punches, did you know, Caroline?”

Jane’s hand reacted on its own, raising to her chest. It laid there, feeling her steady heartbeat and the necklace that Mike had given to her ages ago. The circular pendant rested carefully between Jane’s breasts, like it always did.

“It’s good,” Terry Brenner suddenly murmured in the middle of one of Luke’s monologues about life.

On her left side, Martin Brenner agreed with a silent nod. But Jane saw it. She tried to control her surprise by glancing away from the couple and focusing on the play.

The scenes went on, the characters moving on with their adventure, facing new people, old friends, getting into disputes about what to do, about what was wrong and what was right... There was a funny couple who showed up once in a while. Sometimes all characters would freeze and the two of them would stand by the stage’s edge and talk to each other. They were the entertaining part of the show; the funny guys, the ones that made the public laugh with almost every sentence that left their lips. Even their love declarations to one another got some kind of reaction from the public.

Almost by the of the last act, the funny couple broke up.

They stood in the middle of the stage, holding each other’s hands and crying. Their tears gave the public tears. Jane felt herself touched by their words.

“Maybe one day, my dear,” the guy said, touching his ex-love’s face. “Maybe one day.”

The woman smiled with sad eyes.

“Our paths will never cross again, my love. You know it...”

The scene suddenly changed to Luke and Lee.

“I suppose,” Luke started saying, approaching the stage’s border, “this

is how life was supposed to go. He's there and she's... well, she's happier." He looked behind his shoulder to his mate. "And here we are, Lee. Two guys, one car and... I suppose, a road ahead of us. A new adventure."

The other guy approached his friend and said something back, but Jane didn't catch it. Her husband had just given her a tissue to clean her tears. She refused and stood up, excusing herself.

She crossed the hallway and climbed down the stairs to the first floor. She passed by the main hall and entered a small door that led her to a narrow, dark antechamber. She was almost by the backstage's entrance when something made her stop. Well, not something...

Mike was standing by the entrance, which was covered with thick, red curtains just like the ones in the stage. He was leaning back on the wall, his arms crossed in front of his torso and his teeth biting his bottom lip.

He had heard the steps and looked up. Their eyes met. He frowned, noticing the tears falling down her face.

Jane tried to toughen up and walked up to him.

"It's –" She cleaned a tear – "It's a good play."

Mike stared at her for a moment. He nodded.

"Thank you."

Jane crossed the red curtains and went to meet up with Max.

When her friend saw her, she immediately cut the distance between them and hugged her tightly.

Jane refused to cry more.

August 2004

Eleven had to leave in two weeks to go back to school, so she wanted

to spend as much time as possible with Mike. They weren't dating or anything like that. Since the last time they kissed, they had only held hands and touched more. His shoulder was always meeting hers, his leg brushing against hers... Eleven found herself touching his hair a lot. She just liked how thick it was.

"You're gonna get it all oily," Lucas joked.

Eleven took her hand out of Mike's hair. The boy blushed and looked away, whining Lucas' name. They had not realized that his friends had arrived at the lake.

Snickering, Lucas and the other two boys placed their bikes near Mike's, which was leaning against a big, old tree. Then, they approached the two of them and took of their backpacks. They had brought towels and a set of cards to play.

"You guys, I've learned a new game from my cousins," Dustin told them excitedly, holding the deck of cards in his hand. "Are you ready for it?"

The group sat in a circle and patiently listened to Dustin's explanation of the game. In the end, they played a few rounds, Dustin being the winner in most of them since he knew the game's rules better than the rest. They only stopped after Lucas complained that it wasn't fair anymore. They decided to go for a swim.

Before Mike could even notice anything, Lucas grabbed him by the armpits and pulled him away from Eleven, dragging him to the lake. Dustin followed them closely, laughing hysterically as Mike begged not to be thrown into the water. Of course, Lucas didn't listen to him.

Eleven and Will watched from a safe distance how Lucas threw himself in the water with Mike and then Dustin jumped in afterwards. Will chuckled.

"Why did he do it?" Eleven asked. They had come to the lake a few times together and Lucas had never done that to Mike.

"Oh, you don't see it?" Will replied surprised.

Eleven frowned.

“What?”

“How Mike looks at you. Lucas is tired of it. Well, not bad-tired, you know? Just... Mike’s all...” Will went quiet for a second. “I think I shouldn’t say anything more. Should I?”

Eleven shrugged.

“I liked what you were saying,” she confessed.

Will laughed.

“Of course you did. You two are so funny together.”

The small boy walked towards the lake. Eleven went after him. They sat by the lake’s edge and watched as Mike fought with Lucas, splashing water and trying to pull him under water in vengeance. Dustin was cheering and clapping his hands.

Boys were weird sometimes, Eleven concluded, but they were the nicest as well. Back in her school, most girls didn’t talk to her and the ones that did, sooner or later, Eleven found out what their second intentions were. Or better, their fathers and mothers’ second intentions: Brenner.

At least, with these boys, she was just Eleven. She wasn’t Jane Ives, or Martin Brenner’s stepdaughter. She didn’t have to be perfect.

“You guys don’t want to come in?” Lucas asked.

Will and Eleven shared a look before agreeing to jump swiftly into the water. It was cold, and they shivered together, laughing.

Mike immediately swam closer to Eleven, filling the spot between her and Will. His friend took one look at what he was doing and snorted quietly, swimming away from them.

Lucas and Dustin got the signal and followed Will. Neither Mike nor Eleven noticed their friends had given them some space, both gazing at each other adoringly.

“Look at them,” Lucas said, making a disgusted face. “Remember

when Mike didn't care about girls?"

"Mike doesn't care about girls," Dustin replied.

Lucas looked at him as if he were crazy. Had he not seen how Mike acted around Eleven?

"He only cares about *her*," Dustin corrected, motioning with his head to the couple.

Lucas frowned for a second, before agreeing with Dustin's words. Yeah, Mike still didn't look twice at any of the girls in their school. No matter how many times Julia Anderson said hi to Mike, the boy still didn't notice she was trying to catch his attention.

"He only has eyes for her," Will added, glancing at the two twelve-year-old who were whispering to each other by the lake's edge.

"I have a bad feeling about this," Dustin suddenly confessed. The other two boys looked at him. He shrugged, and his movement made small waves in the lake's water. "I don't know how to explain it, okay? I just have a bad feeling."

"You always have a bad feeling about stuff," Lucas replied. "But, yeah, I agree with you on this one."

Will decided to stay out of it.

On the other side of the lake, Eleven and Mike decided to get out of the water. They quickened their steps to their towels since the grass had hidden some pointy rocks which, if you stepped on the wrong place, they would hurt the back of your feet.

At last, they threw themselves over the towels, finding nice spots where the sun's warm light was hitting. They sat close to each other, allowing the easy silent that was usual between the two to involve them into a relaxing, soundless embrace. They didn't need any words to express themselves to one another; a smile and a look were enough to let the other know what they were feeling.

They hadn't talked about what they were, despite knowing very well they were special to each other. But that wasn't nothing new. Their

kiss, though, that had been new, yet they never talked about it. Mike knew he should gain some courage and say something; ask Eleven out. She was leaving in two weeks for school and only God knew when they would meet again... Mike didn't want to get teased by his friends because he was missing "his special friend". If they were going to tease him, he wanted it to have meaning. He wanted El to actually be his girlfriend.

"Hey El?"

The girl turned to him with sparkling eyes.

"Yes, Mike?" She replied with sweetness in her voice.

He gulped.

"I... Do... When do you have to go back home today?"

"At six."

"Oh..."

Eleven frowned, worried.

"Why? What's wrong?"

Mike licked his lips nervously. He felt tension in his shoulders and the damp in his hands that once belonged to the lake's water was now made of sweat.

"I wanted to have some time with you. You know, alone," he replied, glancing at his friends who were swimming back to land.

Eleven smiled gently.

"I think we can do that, maybe, tomorrow?"

Tomorrow might be too late.

"How about tonight?"

Eleven frowned.

“Mike, I can’t just leave tonight without Jerry’s keys.”

“You don’t have to leave. You can just come to the wire fence and-“

“It’s dangerous at night, Mike,” Eleven replied.

Before the boy could say anything else, his friends came back from the water, all laughing and pushing each other. The three boys grabbed their towels and started pulling them around so that they could get a nice spot by the sun.

Mike remained quiet.

Maybe tomorrow would have to do.

November 2015

December would only arrive in three days, but snow had already been welcomed in the city of Chicago.

Mike’s crew would leave tomorrow. They had been a success in town and the director, Taylor Castillo, promised to get in touch with the two women as soon as the crew started rehearsing a new play. Of course, that would only happen months from now since Mike, who was the writer, had to have the time to plan out a good piece of writing. He told this to Jane and Max like they were two strangers who had not met Mike and talked to him. Truth be told, while Jane had been in her honeymoon, Max had got quite closer to the theatre crew, the playwright included.

“I somehow understand,” Max had confessed to Jane once the woman had got back to work, “why you were charmed by him.”

Jane had rolled her eyes and replied, “He didn’t charm me.”

She had charmed him, but Jane didn’t quite like to remember that.

The director also took the opportunity to invite them to have one last dinner with the crew. They would leave tomorrow morning, each going separate ways. They usually didn’t stay together in the months

that it took Mike to write something new. Each of them had a life somewhere and they went back to it until Taylor Castillo called them back.

Jane wondered where Mike would be going.

Funnily enough, when time for dinner came, the crew took them to the fourth floor of their theatre building, to the small common room at the end of the corridor, and presented them with fifteen boxes of pizza, ten bottles of wine and five of coke. There were bags of chips everywhere as well.

“Oh, this is going to be fun,” Max said, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

They found two empty seats by the table, next to two of the actresses. Jane still didn't quite get them name, mixing them up a bit: one was Anne and the other Claire, but she wasn't sure who was who. They were very alike.

Jane's eyes studied carefully the room's layout. There was a TV hanging on one of the walls, two sofas, some armchairs, a table and five chairs. The room's walls were painted in yellow and its door was black. Finally, her eyes landed where she wanted: Lucas, Will and Mike were all sitting together on one of the sofas. Mike was sitting between his friends, a glass of wine in his hand and his attention turned to the TV, where an episode of a tv show was on.

His hair was a bit messy today, she noticed, almost like he had forgotten to brush it. And he had dark circles under his eyes. Had he slept well last night? Had he gone out?

Something suddenly hit her elbow. It was Max, who was motioning with her eyes to stop looking at Mike.

Jane sighed and turned to the box of pizza in front of them. Half of it was already gone. She took a slice which was covered with ham and olives. The two actresses started making small chat with them, and Jane let herself get absorbed in their plans for the next months. One of them was going back home, to a small town near New York, where her two sisters were. The other one was going to help out a friend in

her hair salon. They were both clearly expecting Mike to come up with another brilliant story so that they can come back to do what they really love doing: acting.

On the sofa, the guys were laughing at something that happened on the TV, except Mike. Mike took the opportunity to get up and leave the common room. He most likely went to his room. Jane stared at his back as he left. Then, she turned to Max. Her friend gave her a sympathetic pat on the hand and a kind smile.

But she didn't quite get it. No one could get it. How hard it was to watch him go away. How hard it was to know he would leave and never come back. Surely, Mike wouldn't accept displaying any of his plays here again, not while the theatre building belonged to Jane.

Yet, his play had been a success. A true success. The crew had been applauded excitedly every night that they acted out to the public. More tickets were sold than the usual. They would leave with quite an amount of money while Jane and Max had a good share of their own. And then..., then there was the play itself. It had been incredible. Mike wrote with this heart, and it showed through his amazing crew mates, through Will's vision on the settings, Lucas' way of sound tracking every scene, the actors' way of portraying the characters.

Even Martin had complimented the play, and he was a hard one to please.

Jane suddenly leaned over to Max and whispered in ear, "Please don't stop me."

Her friend watched as she stood up and quietly left the room, almost unnoticeable. Of course, Will and Lucas saw her and shared a worried look.

But Jane knew what she was doing.

The moment she knocked on Mike's room's door and he opened, her heart skipped a beat. Mike stared at her, his deep brown eyes filled with surprise and a hand frozen middle way through scratching his chest. He had no t-shirt and his jeans were undone.

"Sorry," he muttered and zipped up his jeans. "I was going to sleep and- Well, yeah." A lopsided smile appeared on his thin, soft lips.

Jane tried to reply, to say it was okay, but the words got mingled up in her throat.

She didn't know what she was doing.

"Did you need anything?" Mike asked.

He was trying to put up a polite attitude, trying to be the bigger man in the situation, and Jane wanted to hate him for that, but she couldn't.

"I'm sorry," Jane asked, feeling a gulp in her throat and something burning behind her eyes. "For what I did, the night before my wedding... I mean, I-"

"What, you regret it?" Mike asked, his eyebrows raised.

Jane wanted to say yes, that she regretted have slept with him, and that way, maybe, just maybe, life could be better for both of them; maybe Mike would hate her for using him, for regretting the night they spent together, and that would make it easier for him to live on.

But if she said yes to his question, she would be lying.

"No," Jane confessed. "I... I just hurt you, and-"

"Did I hurt you?" Mike interrupted.

She didn't reply and refused to meet his eyes.

How could he ask her that? She was a wife, she...

"Do you want to come in?" Mike asked next.

Jane nodded and walked in after Mike stepped away from the door. He closed it and then approached the single bed next to the window. The room had three beds and they all seemed to have an owner. Jane assumed they had temporarily belonged to Will and Lucas.

Mike sat down on the edge of his bed and grabbed a t-shirt from the ground. He put it on.

“Yes,” she finally answered. “I mean, yes, you hurt me.”

Mike glanced at her, and a sad, tiny smile appeared on his lips. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his legs, and said nothing at all.

They remained in silence for a while, Mike not facing her at all and Jane staring at him, drinking in every single detail she could get of him. His hair was thicker than before... Suddenly, she remembered how she had loved to play with it, to tangle her fingers with the strands of his black, thick hair. Lucas used to joke about that.

Weren't those good times?

“Why did you break them up?” Jane asked.

Mike looked up, puckering his eyebrows in confusion.

Jane licked her lips apprehensively before explaining, “The funny couple, in your play... I- I never got to ask you, but I always wondered... Why give them such a sad ending?”

As a way of answering, Mike shrugged and straightened up his back. He looked at her with a weird kind of expression; something she couldn't quite read.

“It's life,” he said as he stood up. Jane moved a foot behind, wondering if he was going to approach her. “You think people are perfect for each other, but then life happens.”

Jane nodded, understanding. She looked around at the room. There was a door on the left side that led to the bathroom. The three beds had their sheets disentangled and there were man's clothes everywhere.

“I'd like for you to come back,” Jane finally admitted.

Mike turned to her, arching an eyebrow in curiosity.

“Your play was amazing,” she continued and took a moment to lick

her lips again. “If you write another one and go on tour again-“

“I will and we will,” Mike interrupted to assure her of that.

Jane nodded and gulped.

“Then, please, contact us. I’d like... I would really like for you guys to come back here.”

Mike blinked, staring at her with an odd expression in his eyes. It was like he was trying to read her and her words. Did they have a second meaning? Was she being honest? Was this all because of profit? What did she want from him?

Jane couldn’t admit out loud what she wanted from him.

Not now. Not ever.

“Please,” she begged with a gentle voice.

Mike’s entire body trembled as he took a deep breath, exhaling harshly through his nostrils. Then, he slowly started to nod his head and his eyes softened as he stared at Jane with a different expression, a kinder one.

“I will. We will.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Kudos & Comments are more than welcome.

7. Chapter 7

Present time

“Oh, he’s so... Oh!” Max leaned over the crib and stretched out her arms to pick up little Dylan. Afraid to hurt him in any way, she placed him on her arms with carefulness and gentleness. A delighted smile curled up on her lips. “Isn’t he the cutest?”

Jane, who was sitting on the armchair, exhausted, nodded in a quiet agreement. She was holding her phone in her right hand, an unanswered text from Mike in display. *Can I come by later?*

She had to check with Gus, see when he would get home, and then text Mike back. Nevertheless, if Gus’ eavesdropping ears were right, he would probably be going on a business trip with Martin soon. Whenever there was a trip to plan, they always stayed late in the office. Jane would probably be eating alone tonight. Unless she invited Mike over.

“And he, he has-“ Max blinked a few times. She looked up at Jane, her eyes filled with realization. “He is Mike’s son.”

Jane nodded again. It was obvious he was Mike’s. Anyone who had known she and Mike had been together for the past two years would take one look at the baby and see Mike. There was no trace of Gus in the baby’s features and, if you really wanted to find some resemblance with Jane, you had to look with attention; you had to know what you were looking for. Jane was the mother and even she had some difficulties find similarities between her and her son.

“I always said he was, didn’t I?” Jane retorted, leaning her back against the armchair. She looked at her cell phone again, re-reading Mike’s text.

Last night, Dylan woke up at two am hungry. Gus had stayed in bed, sleeping, since he had to wake up early in the morning. As she breastfed Dylan, she sent Mike a text asking if he was awake and then deleted it immediately. The man had called her back after a few minutes and, even though he was sleepy, he talked to her throughout

the entire time Dylan ate.

He was too good.

She hoped Dylan grew up to be just like his father and, luckily, just a bit like Gus too. Because Gus was good too.

Every day that went by Jane was farther and farther away from being the perfect stepdaughter that Martin Brenner had wanted her to be. Somehow, that fact made her feel a bit proud of herself. Of course, afterwards, she would remind herself *how* exactly she became less and less that perfect stepdaughter and any trace of pride in herself would vanish.

“What are you going to do now?” Max asked, concerned, waking up Jane from her thoughts.

Jane shrugged, moving her hands in a nonchalant way.

“What can I do, Max?” She asked. “What did I do on my wedding day? What did I do on the day I found out I was pregnant? What have I done since the day my mother became a Brenner?”

Max stared at her friend with a heavy kind of look.

Jane suddenly remembered the day she brought Gus home for the first time. Everything had gone well, her mother loving him and her stepfather approving him. In the end, after Gus had left, Brenner had turned to her and asked, “You’re going to keep him, right?”

And naively Jane had replied, “Of course.”

Back then, she hadn’t understood the implied order behind Brenner’s question: *you brought him here, now you’ll keep him.*

“So, you guys are just... I mean... Are you going to tell Gus the truth?”

Jane shook her head.

“I’m not stupid, Max.”

She was a cheater and a bad wife, but she wasn't dumb. If she told the truth to Gus, he would probably do something without thinking clearly. And he would have the right to do so, to react badly against her and against everyone, but... he would ruin his own life by doing so. He would later regret his actions, and most likely would have preferred to keep his mouth shut and accept the fact that Dylan wasn't his. But it would be too late then. Martin Brenner would know the truth too.

Jane stood up carefully. She approached her friend and her son, taking a good look at him. She smiled. She always smiled seeing her new-born.

"He's so tiny," she muttered and touched her son's small face. "But he's quiet. He lets me sleep for most of the night, only waking up to eat."

"You don't seem like you've been sleeping, though," Max replied, eyeing the dark circles on Jane's face.

Jane tried to avoid her friend's worried eyes. There was sorrow and heaviness in her chest that kept her tired, making it hard for her to breath sometimes, to react to others, to life... She was almost like a zombie, stuck in endless process of deciding. Yet, there was no decision to be made.

"I don't know what to do, Max. I mean, I do... I do know what I need to do to keep everything okay, but... But..." She closed her eyes and sighed.

"It's not what you want," Max finished the sentence for her.

Jane agreed with a silent nod.

Dylan moved his little head and clenched his tiny hand into a fist before starting to let out small whimpers.

Jane immediately took him into her arms and shushed him with a gentle hum. After a few moments, her son calmed down.

"He senses you're his mother," Max said, making her way to the armchair. She sat down one of its arms so that Jane could sit on it if

she wanted to. "Is he going to sense that Gus is his father?"

Jane closed her eyes.

"Max."

"What? Listen, I don't want to make this worse for you, but..." Max's eyes turned into two green pools of sympathy. "...you have to think about the future, Jane. I mean, the kid... already doesn't look like Gus. What will happen if he doesn't look like you, but like Mike?"

Jane glanced at her friend before looking down at her new-born again. He was staring at her with his tiny eyes half-opened and his mouth shaped into a small 'o'. He was breathing softly.

"I'll just blame it on the genes," Jane said.

Max snorted, with a hint of cynicism behind it.

"That won't last long, Jane."

Maybe she didn't want it to last long. Maybe she just wanted to throw her life out of the window and-

No, stop it.

It wasn't just her life on the line. It never was. Not since she brought Gus home to meet her stepfather.

But wouldn't it be nice, though? To have her son grow up with the right father? To come home every day and see Mike? Wasn't that one of her dreams when they were both teenagers and in love?

"Do you want to eat those croissants that I brought now?" Max asked, bringing her out of her messy thoughts.

Jane sighed and nodded.

Instead of laying Dylan down in his crib, she decided to take him with her downstairs. Max, being a good friend, prepared them a small pot of camomile tea while Jane sat on one of the kitchen chairs and stroke the few strands of black hair her son had on his head.

Max was putting down a plate of nice, fresh croissants on the table when Jane observed, “I think he has my eyes.”

The redheaded woman looked at her friend, and then at the baby. Dylan had opened his tiny eyes and was looking up to his mother. He had brown eyes. Sweet, brown eyes.

Max smiled.

“Yeah, I think he does too.”

January 2016

She hadn’t seen Mike in fifty-five days. And, yet, he showed up in her dreams almost every night. He didn’t have to be the protagonist of the dream, he would just pop up somewhere and she would immediately wake up. Next to her, Gus would be sleeping soundly, a quick reminder of how her subconscious shouldn’t be broadcasting memories and images of Mike to her at night.

Jane stood up even though it was six am and she only had to get to work at nine. She took a long shower, enjoying the warm drops of water hitting her back and relaxing her. She tried to keep her eyes open all the time, because the minute she closed them, she knew she would see Mike’s face again.

After the shower, Jane took her time rubbing her legs and stomach with a lotion that she had bought in a small, nice shop by the theatre building. The owner, Steve, was a really nice guy who gave her special discounts in exchange for half-priced tickets to plays. The lotion was one of her latest acquisition, in a moment of despair in which she felt like her office was suffocating her with memories of when she first re-met Mike, of when she made agreements with him and the director, of when he had stopped by to take her out for dinner for the second time...

Jane sighed and straightened her back up so she could look at herself in the mirror. She was still in her underwear and her body was moisty with the lotion. It smelled like coconuts.

She had to stop. This was going too far. Either she moved on from what she had done with Mike back in October, or she told the entire truth to Gus.

Taking one last look at herself in the mirror, Jane knew she would just keep living in the limbo she had going through the past fifty-five days since she last saw Mike.

She left the bathroom, letting the window open so that the hot air from the shower dissipated, and went back to the bedroom she shared with her husband. He was still sleeping, having stayed up late last night to revise some deals before Brenner signed them. Jane left a kiss on his forehead before going to get a warm, dark-green dress, a pair of black tights and a pair of furry boots from her closet room.

It was seven and half and she was leaving her house in her black Mercedes and going into the city for breakfast.

She parked her car in an underground parking lot, like she always did, and luckily managed to get a spot close to the exit stairs that led to the street. She only had to walk for a bit until she found a nice coffee shop.

“A bagel and a coffee, please. Could you, perhaps, bring me more than one pack of sugar?” she requested.

The waiter nodded with a polite smile before walking away.

Jane took out her cell phone and decided to send Max a message, asking her if she was already awake. Maybe they could start the day earlier and then finish in time to have a snack before going home.

She got a reply a few minutes later, after the waiter had already brought her breakfast, and three packs of sugar. She thanked him with a sweet smile before reading once again Max’s message.

What are you doing up so early? Is everything okay?

Jane bit her bottom lip.

No one knew how terrible it was for her to fall asleep and then *remain sleeping*. Her mind was always working, always wondering,

always giving her thoughts that she shouldn't be having. Mike was always in her dreams, and, when he got to be the main character of them, sweet Jesus, Jane couldn't even look at her husband for hours afterwards.

Maybe I need a therapist, she thought.

She snorted at her own thought, before answering back Max: *I just couldn't sleep. It happens. Everything's chill*. Then, she grabbed the three packs of sugar and poisoned her black coffee with them.

She stirred the hot drink for a while, while entertaining herself with social media apps in her cell phone. She had an Instagram because of Max, who had once forced her to create a profile just because, and she barely posted pictures in there. Funnily enough, she had a friendship request that she had not seen before. Jane frowned and opened it up.

It was Will Byers' profile.

She blinked, surprised, and let go of the spoon so she could use both hands to touch the screen. She accepted his following request and followed back. Since he had a public profile, she shamelessly decided to check his pictures. The first one, which was updated just a week ago, was of him and Lucas in Hawkins, sharing a beer. The one before that one included Will's older brother and mother. Or, at least, Jane assumed that's who they were according to his caption: *family time*. The third one was posted two weeks ago and it was a really good photo of Mike and Lucas. They were both facing the camera, arms around one another, and the caption said: *a see-you-soon, buddy*.

Jane threw her phone on the table, almost as if it had burned her hand.

A see-you-soon, buddy?

What did that mean?

Will had posted a picture with Lucas a week ago, so, if one of them left, it had to be Mike... Mike had left Hawkins, probably to travel somewhere and write his next play. Where had he gone?

Jane grabbed the phone again and, with no kind of shame or self-control, she tried to see if Mike had an Instagram as well. He did, and the picture that Will had took of him and Lucas sent her right to his profile. It was private. His profile picture was an old, silly picture of himself, from when he was a kid... He must have been twelve in it.

They first kissed when they were twelve.

Jane closed her eyes and put down her phone, blocking it so Mike's profile didn't taunt her. She turned back to her coffee, which was probably colder than she wanted, and her bagel.

It didn't matter now. The past was in the past. What was done was done.

This was tomorrow, like Mike had reminded her on her wedding day.

Nevertheless, she found herself grabbing her cell phone again, unblocking it and sending Mike a follow request.

Then, she quietly finished her meal, paid for it and left, taking the shortest way to her theatre building. Sweetly enough, Max arrived just a few minutes after Jane had sat down on her office's chair, ready to write some e-mails and look for some new clients. Maybe they could do an art exhibition for the next month. Maybe they could get a musical crew to perform there.

"I brought you a latte," Max greeted, carrying two Starbucks cups. She rested the one had Jane's name written on it in front of the woman and then took the empty chair which faced the desk.

"Thanks," Jane muttered and grabbed her cup. She took a quick sip, tasting the sweet, yet with a hint of coffee, warm liquid in her tongue.

"So, guess what?"

Jane looked over her computer screen to her friend.

"What?"

"You have to guess, Janey."

Jane sighed.

“You’ve found a stray dog and you’re gonna keep him?”

Max rolled her eyes.

“That could be a strong possibility, but no. Will Byers sent me an e-mail a couple days ago. It turns out he has this older brother who is a fantastic photographer, and has gathered some old and new good photos for exhibition and selling. He asked us if we would be interested in having him here, at our theatre.”

Jane licked her lips, tasting the latte in them.

“What did you reply?”

“I said that we sure had space in the second floor for it, right? But I would discuss it with you, because you might already have something planned out for the next months-“

“I don’t,” Jane interrupted. Her friend raised an eyebrow. Maybe she had been too eager to say that. “We can exhibit Will’s brother’s photos here. We can sell them easily, I’m sure. If he is good.”

Max’s lips curled into a smirk.

“I’ll guess I’m sending him an e-mail,” she replied, standing up.

Max was about to walk out of the office, when she turned to Jane one last time. There was concern in her facial expression. “You’re really okay, right?”

Jane nodded.

“Yes, of course. Especially with this latte,” she joked, raising the Starbucks cup.

Despite smiling, Max rolled her eyes at her best friend before sticking her tongue out and leaving the office.

Jane was alone again, this time with a latte on her desk and, apparently, no pressuring work to be done. Max would see if Will

Byers' older brother would want to present his photography exhibition in their theatre... If he agreed, he would be the first in line. That was, he would get the month of February. All Jane had to do now was look for other clients to fill in the rest of the months. But they had time.

They always had time

Thanks to Martin's money.

After she finished her latte and visited some artists' webpages, Jane decided to take a small break. She grabbed her cell phone, which, until then, had been resting quietly behind her laptop and leaned back on her black wheeled-chair. She unlocked the phone's screen and noticed she had notifications from Instagram.

It was a following request. From Mike Wheeler.

Jane blinked. Her hands trembled as she accepted the request. Immediately, she went to check his profile. He had few pictures, not more than twenty. She stared at each one of them, especially the ones he showed up (Mike's smile was one of the most beautiful smiles she had ever seen), read the funny captions on each one and analysed all comments' meaning.

Oh God. Why did she read all the comments?

And why did she try and figure out who the girls on the comments were? It shouldn't matter.

Stop making it matter, Jane Ives.

"Knock, knock."

Jane's phone flew from her hands as she jumped in her chair, her throat letting out a scared scream.

Max stared at her best friend like she had just seen a crazy circus number being performed.

"Fuck, Max," Jane muttered as she looked around for her cell phone. She pushed her wheeled-chair behind and crouched on the floor,

looking for it under the desk.

“It’s here, dummy.”

Jane raised her head and it hit the desk.

“Ouch, fuck,” she muttered.

She diverted away from the desk and stood up, an arm behind her blindly searching for her chair.

Max puckered her eyebrows as she watched Jane find her way to her chair, a hand rubbing the back of her head and her eyes closed in pain.

“What were you doing, watching porn in your tiny phone?”

Jane opened her eyes and glared at her.

“You shouldn’t scare people, Max. What if I have a heart condition?”

Max rolled her eyes and peeked at Jane’s phone’s screen. She snorted and threw her friend’s phone at her. Jane clumsily caught it.

“Yeah, a heart condition called Mike Wheeler.” Max sat down in the empty chair in front of the desk. “You have a problem.”

“I don’t.”

“Jane.”

“Max.”

They faced each other in dead quiet, serious staring contest.

In the end, Max gave up and sighed.

“Fine, whatever. Anyways, Jonathan Byers replied to my e-mail. He sent me some photos and, damn, he is good, like *reeeally* good. So, I booked him in for the last week of January and the first of February. He says he has enough photos so that if they are all sold out in the first week (which, by the way, he doesn’t believe they will, but they will), there’s a second stock for the second week. And-“ Max noticed

how Jane glanced down at her phone's screen, which was still flashing a photo of Mike Wheeler wearing a black beanie and smiling –“You need a therapist.”

Jane raised her head, surprised, her mouth half-opened.

“Huh?”

Max motioned with her eyes to the phone.

Jane looked down at her phone, Mike's face still smiling at her, and turned it around.

“I don't need a therapist,” Jane replied. “And I can't get one.”

Max frowned.

“Why not?”

“Because I'll have to pay the therapist. And, if I pay a therapist, my husband will see it and he'll wonder why I need a therapist.”

Max leaned forward, resting her arms on the desk. She motioned a nonchalant hand in the air before saying, “You need one so that you can fall out of love with your first love. You need one to tell you that it's wrong to daydream about your first love when you have a husband. Or that it was wrong to sleep with-“

“Okay, stop it.”

Max raised an eyebrow.

Jane sighed.

“I get it. I have a problem.”

“And?”

“And-“

Suddenly, Jane's phone vibrated. She and Max glanced at each other before she grabbed the phone and unlocked it.

Mike had sent her a message on Instagram. She gulped and opened it.

Why did you do this?

Jane frowned and texted back.

Did what?

“What’s happening?” Max asked.

Instead of waiting for an answer, she stood up and went around the desk. She sat on the chair’s arm and tilted Jane’s phone as Mike’s reply came on.

Follow me. What’s this, El?

“El?”

Jane tried to keep the nostalgic smile from her face.

“He used to call me Eleven. Because I was his wish from the 11:11, you know?”

Max stared at her. Jane looked away from her worried eyes and answered back.

I don’t know. I’m sorry.

“Did I say the right thing?”

“After doing the wrong thing, yeah,” Max answered.

Jane threw her head back, hitting the chair.

“Why do I do this-“

The phone vibrated. She raised it up and read Mike’s answer.

I’m in Chicago.

August 2004

The day after going to the lake with Lucas, Dustin and Will, Eleven and Mike met by the wire fence. This time, when Eleven got there, she noticed how Mike wasn't standing up, holding on to his bike, ready to go the second she arrived, but rather sitting on top of a blanket with a bag of cookies and two orange juice boxes. He looked at her with a shy smile.

"Hi."

Eleven frowned, confused.

"I thought we were going for a walk?"

Mike gazed away, blushing.

"I thought we could do something different."

Eleven took a few steps and knelt down on an empty spot of the blanket. She looked over at the cookies and the juice boxes.

"I didn't have much at home," Mike explained the lack of food and drink. "But... I think this will do, right?"

She smiled gently at him and nodded. Anything Mike did was good enough for her.

"But I just ate lunch," she confessed shyly.

Mike shrugged.

"It's okay. They can wait," he assured, motioning with his chin to the cookies. "We can just... talk?"

Eleven raised an eyebrow in suspicion.

Avoiding her gaze, Mike leaned forwards and re-arranged the things on the blanket so that they had more space to move. He felt Eleven's eyes burning in his head, wondering what he was up to. What was this? Instead of wandering off like they always did, he would rather stay by the wire fence? What for?

Mike finally looked back at her and forced a smile. He was nervous.

Eleven sat back on her legs and stared at her friend with a deep frown. Worry made its way into her body as she wondered why Mike was acting like this. Was something wrong? Had she done something wrong?

“What is it?” She asked.

Mike blinked, flustered.

“N-nothing, El.”

“You’re nervous,” she remarked. He dug his teeth into his bottom lip, almost proving her point. “Why are you nervous? Did something happen?”

Mike shook his head, letting go of his lip.

“N-no.”

“But you are nervous,” Eleven said.

Mike gulped and admitted with a silent nod.

Eleven’s frown deepened. Carefully, she raised herself on her knees and moved slowly to Mike’s side. She sat down next to him and laid a hand on his hand.

“Why are you nervous?” She asked, worried.

Mike’s eyes flickered away as he bit his bottom lip again, this time thoughtful.

Eleven waited patiently until her friend finally nodded, agreeing with himself on something. He turned to his backpack and took out something from there. It was a book. He gave it to her.

Eleven grabbed the book carefully. She frowned, reading the title. *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* by J.K. Rowling. She had heard about Harry Potter before, but had none of the books. Why was Mike giving it to her?

“Open,” he said.

She looked at him, confused, before opening the book on the first page. On top of it, there was Mike's name written in his clumsy, roundish handwriting and a date: March, 25th 2001.

"That's when I got the book," Mike confessed. He motioned with his head, asking her to keep going.

Eleven was finding the all thing very confusing, but she flicked through the book until stopping almost at the end. There was a postcard and a squarish sticker of a Dungeons and Dragons' figure at the beginning of a chapter. She put down the book and took the postcard out. It had an image of a kitten and a puppy sleeping next to each other, surrounded by flowers. She smiled softly before opening it.

Dear El,

I'm not good with words when it comes to you. I know you don't see it in the same way I do, but it's true. There are things that I can't look you in the eyes and say because I'm an idiot.

I can't believe I'm doing this over a text, while you're sitting right in front of me, but it was either like this or I would never get the balls to do it...

El, I'm giving you this book, which belonged to me for three years, and this sticker, which I won after a bet with Lucas two years ago, because they are two of my favourite things. I'm giving you this postcard with a kitty and a puppy because I think we're like them. I gave you a necklace because I never want you to forget about me. I wish I could give you more, but I don't have much, to be honest.

El, the truth is, I really like you. I think I won't ever like anyone like I like you.

I want you to be more than a friend.

Do you want the same?

Love, Mike

El re-read the last lines more than once, her mouth opened in a soundless gasp, her eyes big and overwhelmed.

In front of her, Mike was a wreck, fumbling with his fingers, sweat sticking to his skin, his tongue tasting like blood because he had bit it too hard. Eleven was still reading his text. It wasn't a big text, nor a good one... Mike tried, he really did, but nothing he wrote last night (and he had written so many drafts before coming up with this one) was never good enough. And El deserved something that was good enough.

"El..." He called out in a tiny voice.

She looked up from the text, her cheekbones warm red and her eyes awe-struck. Mike wanted to get his hopes up, but he wasn't sure if he should.

"Can... I... Can... I-" Mike went quiet. He didn't know what to say. What could he-

"Mike."

El's voice made him look back at her again. She smiled softly and leaned in, her lips meeting his for just a few seconds. They were soft and warm.

They pulled back at the same time and opened their eyes. Eleven looked down at the postcard again. She caressed its cover before putting it back inside the book, next to the sticker. She closed the book and held it to her chest.

"Yes," she said. "I want to be more than friends too."

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you all for sticking around. I apologize for any mistakes. I promise the angst won't be as bad from now on.

Please, tell me what you think.

8. Chapter 8

December 2004

Mike had bought Eleven a Christmas gift. It had taken him a while to choose the right gift, and even now that he had it, he wasn't sure if it was the best one. The gift was a small wooden box with the shape of a sleeping cat engraved into its cover. It was supposed to be a jewellery box, but he was going to tell El to use it for whatever she wanted.

He was super excited to get some time with her, with *his* girlfriend, no matter if they only got hours or days together. During the school months, they had occasionally talked over the phone with each other. If Mike was in charge, he would call her every day, but, unfortunately, Eleven couldn't drag much attention to her phone calls in school or the teachers would report or comment with her mother. What could Eleven possibly say if her mother asked who she kept calling so many times?

Sadly enough, three days before Christmas vacation began, Mike got his heart broken over a phone call when Eleven told him she and her family would be spending the holiday back in god-knows-where with Brenner's snob family. She didn't want to go, but she had not kind of voice in this type of decisions. She would probably be back the day on January 1st, having a couple days in Hawkins. Maybe they could meet then.

"Yeah, maybe," Mike muttered to the phone, eyeing the living-room's entrance since he knew his older sister liked to eavesdrop his conversations on the phone with the mysterious girl.

"I'm really sorry, Mike," Eleven repeated. There was a small pause. "I... I have a gift for you."

His heart skipped a beat and a tiny smile spread on his lips.

"I have a gift for you too," he confessed.

On the other side of the line, he could almost hear Eleven's smile as

she said, “Really?! Oh!”

Mike let out a soft chuckle, scratching his chin. On the corner of his eye, he saw a shadow. He looked over at the living-room’s entrance. His older sister was leaning against the wall with a smirk on her lips. He sighed.

“El, I have to go. Nancy is calling for me,” he kind of lied. He didn’t want to admit that his older sister was teasing him with her eyes, waiting to hear him say something sweet to his mysterious friend who was attending a broad school.

“Oh, okay. Bye, Mike. I’ll call you next week?”

“Yes!”

The excitement in his voice made his sister chuckle. Mike’s cheeks turned a deep red as he muttered a bye to El before hanging up. He glared at Nancy.

“What?” She asked, pretending to be innocent.

“I hate you,” he muttered and made his way to leave the living-room. Yet, his sister stopped him with a stretched-out arm. He looked at her with a scowl. “What is it?”

“Who is the mysterious friend of yours? A girlfriend?” Nancy joked.

Without hesitation, Mike replied, “yes.”

Nancy’s smirk fell off her lips and her blue eyes grew bigger. Her mouth was left hanging opened.

“W-what?”

Mike cleared his throat and looked back at his sister, trying to keep up a strong attitude.

“Yes, she is my girlfriend,” he made it clear.

Mike made a move to leave again, but this time her older sister stopped him by grabbing him by his shoulders with both her hands.

“Nancy-“

“When did you get a girlfriend?” She demanded to know.

“Last summer,” he replied.

Nancy blinked.

“Does she know she’s your girlfriend?”

Mike furrowed his eyebrows, offended.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

Nancy let go of his shoulders.

“Nothing. I’m-“ The fifteen-year-old licked her lips and moved a strand of her brown hair from in front of her eyes. “I’m just surprised you got the balls to ask someone out.”

Mike looked away, embarrassed and flustered.

“I wrote her something.”

Nancy raised an eyebrow.

“You wrote something?”

Mike nodded.

“Yeah. I couldn’t do it with spoken words, so... I wrote her a postcard. I gave her my favourite Harry Potter book, a Dungeons and Dragons’ sticker and-“

Mike’s explanation got interrupted with a loud snort from his sister.

He glared at her before adding, “I also gave her a necklace, but that was a long time ago.”

Nancy seemed impressed with that last one.

“What’s her name?”

“Eleven.”

Nancy raised an eyebrow, going back to being suspicious of the all thing.

“Eleven is not a person’s name.”

“It’s what I call her.”

Nancy threw her hands in the air.

“And what’s her real name?”

“Jane,” Mike said. He glanced at the hall. On the other side of it, there was the entrance to the dining-room and kitchen. His mother was somewhere in there baking cakes for Christmas eve. “Can I go now?”

Nancy opened her mouth to reply with a witty remark or something, but her brother moved his hand, almost like saying *just forget it*, and left the living-room. She watched him as he climbed up the stairs and disappeared to the second floor.

Upstairs, in his bedroom, Mike opened his wardrobe and searched for the gift he had bought Eleven. He grabbed the squarish box, covered in an orange wrapping paper, and sat down on his bed. He sighed, sad.

Long-distance relationships sucked. Mike was only thirteen and already knew that.

January 2016

Jane Ives tried to behave. She truly did. She did not think too much about Mike’s Instagram message, or the fact that it said he was in the same city as she was... Not, not at all. She just, you know, walked into a shop, or turned right or left in a corner, and hoped to bump into him. Every time someone knocked on her office’s door, or her phone rang, she hoped it was him.

But he wouldn't do that. He wouldn't approach her like that. God, she was a married woman. It was bad enough she kept thinking about Mike, now she wanted him to make a move on her?

"Jonathan Byers is coming by in three days," Max informed Jane as she entered her friend's office. She was looking down at her cell phone, probably reading his e-mail. "He says he won't need our accommodations. It turns out he knows someone in town and will stay with them. He also asked if he could display his photographs the way he wants to. Of course, I'm going to say yes as long as, you know, he doesn't demand things out off budget. But he doesn't seem like one to do so. And--"

Max pressed her lips together and stared at her best friend.

It took Jane a few seconds to realize that Max had stopped talking. She blinked, momentarily confused, and raised her head to look at her friend.

"What's wrong?"

"*You*," Max replied.

Jane raised an eyebrow, offended. Max scowled.

"You're always daydreaming about something, Jane. Jesus."

Jane sighed and leaned forwards, resting her elbows on her desk. She massaged her forehead.

"I'm sorry. I'm going to have dinner with my mom tonight."

Max frowned.

"And Gus and your stepfather?"

"Late meeting. Last preparations before leaving for Spain in two days," she explained and leaned back on her wheeled-chair again. She closed her eyes. "My mom thinks I'm going to act like that desperate little wife who will miss her husband terribly because he is going away for two weeks."

“You should,” Max replied.

Jane glared at her. Her friend snorted.

“It would be quite hilarious to see you act like a desperate little wife, Jane, just saying.”

Jane made a face.

“I’m not desperate, nor little.”

Her phone, which was resting next to her laptop, beeped. Trying to act cool about it, she grabbed it and opened it, finding a message from her husband saying that his trip to Spain was brought forwards six hours. Instead of leaving in two days, at seven am, he would be leaving at one am. Jane sighed and put down the phone.

“Bad news?”

“Husband leaving earlier.”

Jane looked at her laptop’s right corner to check the time.

11:11.

An involuntary smile curled into her lips. It didn’t make her happy, or feel good to see that hour, but a smile appeared nonetheless.

“Let’s go have lunch?” She asked.

Max looked at her wrist-watch.

“But it’s eleven am...”

“We can start with dessert and have an ice-cream.”

“Jane, we’re in January. It’s raining outside.”

Jane raised a daring eyebrow.

Max sighed.

“Fine. But I get to put hot chocolate topping on mine.”

Jane got to her mother and Martin's house around six pm. She parked her car in their underground garage, next to the empty slot that belonged to her husband's car, and got out of it, leaving the keys inside like she always did. No one was going to steal the car in there.

She climbed the cemented stairs to the house and opened the wooden door that led her to a vast, well ornamented hallway. The walls were covered in pictures and paintings. There were plants and a terrible, red carpet on the floor. Jane sighed, closed the door behind her and crossed the corridor until she met the hall. In there, she left her purse and her jacket. She went to find her mother upstairs, in her reading room.

Terry Brenner put down the book she had been reading and stood up to greet her daughter with a hug.

"Oh, sweetie, how have you been?" She asked with tenderness. She touched her daughter's brown curls. "It's getting longer."

"I'm going to have it cut soon," Jane replied, even though she had barely given any thoughts about her hair in the past weeks. "How have you been doing, Mom?"

"Oh, you know, I'm fine. I'm always fine." Terry waved a nonchalant hand before pulling her daughter out of the reading room. "I already have some snacks prepared for us."

"Mom, you didn't have to." Jane stopped her right before they got to the stairs. "Do you mind if I go to my room?"

Terry smiled at her daughter and tapped her cheek.

"Of course, sweetie. I'll be in the dining room, okay?"

"Okay, Mom," Jane replied in a soft voice.

She watched as her mom climbed down the stairs in a slow pace and then turned back to where she had come from. Her bedroom was two doors away from her mother's reading room.

The door to her bedroom was the only yellow door in the gigantic first-floor hallway of the house. She had painted it herself, wanting it

to stand out among the boring brown doors.

Her bedroom was the second largest of the house, being her mother and Martin's the biggest one, of course. She had a private bathroom for herself, on the right side of the room. Next to it, there was another door, but this one led to a closet room which was now mostly empty. Her bed stood tall and large in the middle of the bedroom. It still had sheets and a light blue blanket over it. Her desk, the one she had used so many afternoons and nights to study, was on the left side of the room, next to the balcony's glass doors. The walls were painted in a soft yellow and covered with theatre plays posters and photographs.

Jane made her way to her bed and sat down. She took off her boots and placed her feet on the fluffy white carpet. She looked around for a while, remembering what she had felt the first time she had entered this room when she was fifteen: she had hated it, yet a part of her had accepted and liked the bedroom because it was hers. She remembered how much she had wanted to share it with Mike. That particular thought had started a stream of uncontrollable tears that her mother had not been able to stop or understand.

The first months in Chicago had been tough, especially since she carried a heaviness in her heart for having broken Mike's heart. She had left in the middle of July, without a word, after making him believe they still had some time to be together. She thought it had been better that way, to end things abruptly. It would hurt less in the future.

Truth was, it did hurt less. Until they met again.

Jane's eyes suddenly flickered to the bookshelf that rested near the desk. It was filled with books and little pieces of knickknack that she had gathered along the years. Yet, there was something that caught her eyes. She stood up and walked up to it. On one of the lowest shelves was a wooden box. On its lid, there was the shape of a sleeping kitten engraved in it. She touched the box gently.

"It's a jewellery box, but you can use it for whatever you want," Mike told her with a shy smile.

Eleven raised her mesmerized eyes from the beautiful wooden box to her boyfriend.

“Why a kitten?” She asked.

Mike’s lips pressed harder together. He looked away for a moment, shy.

“Well, remember the postcard I gave you?” He asked. She nodded eagerly. “It had a kitten and a puppy and-“

“They reminded you of us,” Eleven finished his sentence.

“Yes. And...well, you’re obviously the kitten.”

Jane closed her eyes, the ghost of the happy smile she had had on that day on her lips. It had been such an amazing first love, what she and Mike had had. Mike had always outdone himself, always surprising her by being so good, so... almost perfect.

Opening her eyes, she moved her head up to the stacked books in the top shelves. She raised her hand and, in a gentle stroke, passed her fingers through the book spines. Her hand stopped by the only Harry Potter book she ever owned. The third of all series. A gift from Mike.

She took it out of its space and opened it, revealing Mike’s name and a date on top of the first page. She flickered through the pages until she found the postcard Mike had given her. He had asked her out through it, being too shy to pronounce the words to her face.

Jane grabbed the postcard and opened it. She smiled, tears in her eyes, as she saw the clumsy, roundish handwriting that had once belonged to a twelve-year-old Mike Wheeler. She read the text twice, feeling as if she were a kid again, reading those words for the first time, remembering how he had prepared a picnic for them in the place they had first met, how he had been so nervous to the point he had bitten his own tongue (she knew that because, when they kissed, after officially being boyfriend and girlfriend, she had tasted the blood in his mouth).

She was about to read a third time when a sudden mushy circle appeared on the postcard. She realized it was a tear. Raising a hand to her face, Jane felt tears on her skin.

Putting the book back to where it belonged, with the postcard in it, Jane made her way to her old private bathroom. She cleaned herself with harsh hands, wiping along her make-up, until her face was red.

After drying her face against a soft, white towel that she found somewhere in one of the bathroom's pieces of furniture, she left her room behind and went to meet up with her mother in the dining-room.

Terry Brenner was sitting in front of a table filled with small snacks and a big, made of porcelain pot of tea. By the kitchen's entrance, there were two young maids, who smiled at Jane when they saw her. She smiled back at them and, almost feeling like an animal in a zoo, sat down next to her mother.

One of the maids made a move to approach her.

"You don't have to," Jane said in a sweet voice.

The maid's lips curled into a polite, professional smile and she went to stand by the wall again. Jane sighed. Martin Brenner had rigorous rules implemented in his house's workers. They had to be like ghosts most of the time. But how could they actually be ghosts when they did all the work?

Terry Brenner was spreading butter on a toast when she said, "So, if you feel lonely in the next days, you can--"

"Mom, please," Jane interrupted as she carefully poured herself a cup of hot tea. "I'm not going to go crazy just because Gus is going on a business trip. He has gone before. It's nothing new."

Terry seemed a bit sad with how easy her daughter was taking this.

"Well, yes, but marriage--" She quieted herself.

Jane glanced at her mother from above her cup of tea.

Taking a look at the maids, Terry motioned with her hand for them to leave the room. The maids nodded and, as quiet as possible, left the dining-room and went into the kitchen.

Jane put down her cup and looked at her mother, her lips pressed together and her eyebrows puckered in confusion.

Terry Brenner leaned over and touched her daughter's hand.

"Honey, you know that you can talk to me about anything, okay?"

Jane's frown deepened. Where was this talk coming from?

"I mean, marriage can change a few things and... I don't want you to go through anything alone, you know?"

Jane blinked.

"Don't worry, Mom," she replied. "I mean, nothing has changed. Gus and I are okay."

Terry's eyes flickered away for a second. She hesitated in doing something, in saying something. In the end, she just smiled.

"I'm glad, sweetie."

The moment Jane found herself back in her car again, in Brenner's underground garage, she grabbed her phone, opened the Instagram app and went to the unanswered message Mike had left her.

I'm in Chicago, it said.

Good, Jane thought and finally typed down an answer.

Can we meet?

Present Time

"You're just going to keep lying," Terry Brenner stated, surprised.

Jane, who was breastfeeding her one-month old son, nodded.

It was warm outside, yet there was a nice breeze keeping it from getting too warm; a perfect example of a June afternoon. Summer began just a few days ago, and the Brenner family had decided to

celebrate it with a day off and barbecue in Martin's huge backyard. Jane had hated that backyard when they first moved to Chicago. It wasn't as big as the one they had had in Hawkins. It didn't have Mike on the other side of the fence either. Nor did it have Jerry, the gardener, or any of the old maids... All of them had been left behind.

Jane's feet were still a bit swelled from the pregnancy and she couldn't bear to put on any kind of shoes unless they were flip flops. The heat wasn't helping at all. Gus did try to massage her feet once, but he was terrible at it.

"You can't," Terry stated.

"Mom," Jane sighed. It was so hard to make her mother understand why she had to lie about Dylan's fatherhood. It was hard because it had to do with her husband's nature, and, of course, her mother wouldn't see it the way Jane saw it. "Isn't it easier to just let things be as they are? Why bother Gus? Why bother Martin?"

"Because it's wrong, Jane," Terry replied, moving away from the window, where she had been snooping on her son-in-law's terrible way of hanging wet garments on the clothes line in the backyard. She looked over at her daughter, who was cleaning her son's tiny mouth and then putting on her bra again. "Are you happy like this?"

Jane didn't dare to look at her mother.

"Jane," her mother called out.

"I don't know, Mom," she answered.

Jane stood up and walked over to her son's crib. She laid him down carefully, the baby looking at her with his tiny, brown eyes in confusion. He stretched his arms out, asking to be held again. She sighed.

"Dylan..."

The baby started whimpering.

Jane picked him up again and held him closely to her body. Her baby stopped making any noise and looked up at her with happy eyes,

both his hands closed into two tiny grips. She smiled at him.

“Jane,” Terry called.

She raised her head to look at her mother. Terry Brenner suddenly looked older than her beautiful forty-three years.

“Yes, Mom?”

Terry Brenner moved her lips in a soundless sentence, her hands moving in the air, almost like they were trying to grab the words she wanted to use, before finally managing get the guts to ask her daughter, “Are you going to keep seeing that man... That Mike Wheeler?”

Jane blinked. Her mother’s face was unreadable as she patiently waited for an answer.

“He knows Dylan is his, so... yes, he wants to see his son and-“

“And you?” Terry asked abruptly. “Are you going to see him?”

Jane understood the implied question in her mother’s words. Gulping, she gazed away, her eyes turning to her half-sleeping son, who was content now that he was in his mother’s arms.

“Mom, please.”

If she admitted that she would, her mother would go bananas. The situation was bad enough as it was, and her mother was certainly a few steps away from telling the truth to Brenner. Jane couldn’t let that happen.

“Gus doesn’t deserve this.”

“I know he doesn’t!” Jane almost shouted.

Dylan opened his eyes and whimpered a bit, moving his tiny arms. Jane tried to soothe him again.

“I know he doesn’t, Mom,” she repeated in a gentler tone of voice. “I’m the bad guy here, I know, okay?”

Terry Brenner stayed quiet, staring at her daughter almost as she was stranger. Then, out of blue, her expression softened and she sighed. She cut the distance between herself and her daughter and put an arm around Jane's back.

"I've made a lot of mistakes in my days," she said. "You never held those things against me, did you now?"

Jane shook her head.

Terry's lips pressed together into a sincere smile.

"I just hope you find your right path, sweetie. Like I found mine."

Jane nodded, feeling a tear escaping her eye.

Her mother cleaned the tear for her.

January 2015

She was too well-dressed for just a quick coffee.

Jane looked down at herself, at the dark tight jeans she had chosen to wear because they made her ass look good, and the white blouse, which, in the right light, you could probably see her bra, and realized she had basically dressed herself up for a date.

The din of the bell above the coffee shop's door echoed to her ears as a new client arrived.

Jane raised her head just in time to see Mike walk into the shop. He looked around for a moment until his eyes met hers. He didn't smile and Jane bit her bottom lip preventing herself from smiling politely.

When he approached the table, she stood up to greet him. Mike frowned, confused, and reached out with his hand to shake hers. Confused and a bit disappointed – even though she had not right to feel like that -, Jane shook his hand. Then, they both sat.

A waiter came to take Mike's order. He glanced at the tea in front of

Jane and asked for the same thing.

There was a quiet moment in which both stared at each other without knowing what to say. Well, Jane didn't know what to say. She was sure Mike was just waiting for her to talk since she had been the one to ask for this. She was the one wearing a wedding band.

Jane took the time to stare at her first love. Under his dark brown jacket, Mike was wearing a blue shirt, and his usual messy dark hair had been combed a bit to make him look presentable. She almost let herself smile at that. He tried to look nice too.

When the waiter came back with Mike's tea, they hadn't even shared a simple hello.

They faced each other in an awkward silence for a bit longer, until, finally, Mike gave in and sighed.

"Why did you ask for this?"

"Because I wanted to see you," Jane answered with no hesitation.

Mike let out a cynical chuckle and shook his head, his eyes never meeting hers. He sat up straight in his seat and grabbed one of the two packs of sugar that came with tea.

"I don't understand you, Jane."

Jane.

"Don't."

Stirring his tea in a slow movement, Mike glanced at her, confusion written in his eyes.

"Don't what?"

"Don't call me that," she asked in a whispered, sad voice.

Mike stared at her, frowning, as he tried to understand her, tried to read between the lines.

Had she become a bad person? Could she still be the girl Mike had first fallen in love with?

“We haven’t talked in years,” Jane found herself saying. “Even though, you know, we met again in October... We never got a chance to really talk about... us.”

Without even looking at her, Mike raised an eyebrow. He took the spoon out of his tea, rested it on the small, white plate and then picked up the warm cup. He took a long sip of it.

Jane watched how Mike ignored her while he enjoyed his warm drink. She gave him the time to do it, biting her tongue so that she wouldn’t ask him to say something.

It was only when he placed the cup back down again that Mike decided to talk.

“You want to talk about us? Fine. First question: Why didn’t you call me?”

Jane looked at him, confused.

“When you first moved here,” Mike explained. “You lied about the time we had together, then left without saying anything and... And you never called.”

Jane felt her throat close in to what could be a sob.

“Why did you do that, El?” Mike asked, almost begging. His eyes finally turned to her.

Jane took a deep breath.

“I was stupid.”

Mike stared at her.

“I thought it would make it easy for both of us. Because it had already been difficult when we only saw each other during holidays, imagine what would be like if we tried out a long-distance relationship like that... Me, in Chicago, you in Hawkins. It would

never work out.”

“But you could at least tell me that face to face,” Mike said. “Or in a phone call. Or in a fucking letter. *Anything* would be better than silence.”

Jane felt the anger in Mike’s speech. His eyes, though, they showed something else; something heavy, a dead light of someone who had thought about this conversation over and over and only ended up with one feeling: sorrow.

“You hate me,” Jane stated.

Mike shook his head.

“There were moments I thought I did. Then, I guess I moved on. You did what you wanted and I... I thought it was better to just let you go. Of course, everything was going well until- “Mike licked his lips, hesitating –“last October.”

Jane nodded in a silent agreement. Last October had screwed up everything.

Had it? Really?

“I’m sorry,” Jane apologized. Mike glanced at her, expectant, while taking another sip of his tea. “For what I did back then... I should have been completely honest with you, but, believe me, Mike, I truly thought I was doing the best for both of us.”

Mike put down his cup and shrugged.

“I’m not going to blame you for what you did when you were fifteen, El. I mean, we were kids. We have to make mistakes to learn and be...wiser, I guess.” Mike rested his arms on the table, one on each side of his cup of tea, and tangled his fingers together. “But you said we never got to talk about us, so... I had to ask you that question. I had to know.”

Jane nodded, understanding.

“Of course.”

There was a quiet moment between the two of them. Jane looked down at her empty cup of tea before saying, "Why are you here, in Chicago?"

Mike scratched his chin, averting his eyes from her, and then moved a hand in a nonchalant way.

"I liked the city, I honestly did," he said in a sincere tone of voice. "I rented a small room far away from your theatre building. Well, not that far away, but... I tried to stay away from it. From you." He looked at her. "I'm writing a new play and, when inspiration came to me, I thought: this one is going to happen in Chicago. So, I came here to get to know the city before writing it down in the play. You know, so that when people see the play, they feel accuracy in it. I mean, I know it's fiction, but... if it can have a bit of truth in it, why not write it down?"

A kind, awed smile curled up in Jane's lips as she watched Mike talked about his work, about what he was passionate about.

"And you?" He asked.

Jane looked at him, surprised.

"And me what?"

"What have you been up to?" He questioned, drinking the last sip of his tea.

"Oh," Jane let out, suddenly feeling embarrassed. She hid both her hands under the table, on her lap, and she knew very well she did it because of her wedding ring. "Nothing much. Max and I are going to do business with Will's older brother."

Mike nodded.

"I've heard. He's a fantastic photographer... Wait, here." Mike leaned back so that he could reach his cell phone, which was inside his jeans' front pocket. He took it out and played with it for a few seconds before moving the screen to Jane. "Here's a picture he took of me and my young sister, Holly. You remember Holly?"

Eleven nodded, remembering how Mike used to complain about his young sister, Holly, who always wanted to play dolls with him, and he had no patience for it, but did it anyways because, oh well, it was his sister, after all.

In the photograph, Mike was sitting in an old armchair, his head tilted back, his eyes closed, and his sister, who was probably twelve in the picture, was on his lap and was smiling up at him. You could see it was Christmas because a small part of the Christmas tree had been caught in the picture, in the background. Mike and Holly had matching sweaters too. They looked adorable.

“It’s so... warm,” Eleven said.

Mike nodded.

“Yeah, Jonathan always manages to capture the essence of each moment, you know?”

She smiled.

“I can’t wait to work with him, then.”

Mike let out a soft chuckle and put down his phone, next to his empty cup of tea.

They shared a quiet, long look. Mike’s eyes never left her face, but Jane took the time to observe his physical figure once again. When she was younger, she used to do it a lot: take her time to look at Mike when he wasn’t looking. A quiet, distracted Mike had been a very fascinated thing to look at. No matter what he was doing, Mike was always Mike. He was true to himself.

Even though years had gone by since they first met, since they first fell in love with each other, Mike was still Mike. He was a playwright, a loyal, good friend to his friends, to his crew, a younger brother, an older brother, a son...

He was the opposite of her.

Jane didn’t know who she was. When she was with her mother, she was little Jane Ives. When she was with Brenner, she had to be the

perfect stepdaughter. When she was with Gus, she was supposed to be Jane Evans, but she wasn't. She couldn't be.

She was so many Janes and none at the same time.

But, with Mike, things were different. With him, she didn't have to be a Jane. He never once asked her to play a character for him because Mike was always Mike. When she was with him, she let go of the many Janes she had to be and became Eleven. Just Eleven.

"It wasn't a mistake," she found herself saying out loud.

Mike blinked, confused.

A soft, sad smile appeared on Eleven's lips.

"What happened in October," she explained.

Mike gazed away, his cheeks turning into a warm colour of red.

"Why are you saying that, El?" He asked.

"Because I'm someone when I'm with you," she confessed.

Mike's eyes met hers. There was a light in them, something sincere, captivating. He was getting pulled into something he wasn't quite sure what it was; all he knew was that his Eleven was there to catch him.

They ended up going back to the theatre building. They climbed the stairs to the last floor, to the attic, glancing at each other with dumb, shy smiles on their lips. It had been a silent agreement to come here, to do this. Mike let himself follow Eleven into the attic. He watched as she locked the door behind them. Then, she got rid of her purse, of her jacket and Mike did the same.

He approached her in a quiet pace, stopping halfway to take off his shoes. Eleven smiled softly as she leaned back against the door and waited for him. Mike stopped when their bodies touched each other.

"Do I still owe you something?" He asked.

Eleven raised her hand and touched his cheekbone.

“No. I’m the one that owes you everything.”

Slowly, both leaned in until their lips touched.

Notes for the Chapter:

I apologize for the delay. I wanted to add another scene to this chapter, but I honestly couldn't write it all down, so here it is... I'm not sure when I'll be posting a new chapter.

I hope you enjoy this chapter. If there are any grammar mistakes, please don't hesitate on telling me.